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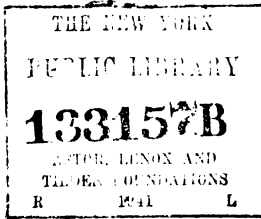
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THE ADVENTURES OF
MORTIMER DIXON



TO
RUDOLPH DE CORDOVA
THE BEST FRIEND IN
THE WORLD

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THE ADVENTURES OF MORTIMER DIXON

CHAPTER I

MORTIMER DIXON, that best of good fellows and prince of up-to-date journalists, was in a royal rage.

He had made an appointment with the Plump Little Party who lived at Brixton, whom he was going to marry when he took his next holiday, to meet him at Victoria, that they might go and buy chairs and tables in the Tottenham Court Road.

She had kept the appointment, but Mortimer Dixon had not.

At the last moment his chief, who ruled the destinies of the great paper which he served, had whistled down the tube for him, and had ordered him off to the East End of London to investigate the lurid loves of a Chinaman and a char-woman.

To make matters worse, the great man had ordered Mortimer to take a photographer along.

Now, if there was one thing more than another that Mortimer Dixon hated, it was photographers.

"Journalism's bad enough," he used to confide to the Plump Little Party in moments of depression, "but to go around with a beast with a camera and soiled shirt-cuffs is simply low. If I've to do it again, you see, I'll chuck journalism and take up flying."

At the mere suggestion of such an occupation as a living, his sweetheart dropped the white muslin curtain she was making on to the floor, and screaming, "Oh, Morty! how can you!" burst out crying as if her little heart would break.

It was, indeed, to pacify her terror and restore her usual heavenly equanimity that Mortimer had planned the

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What with his little sweetheart straining her pretty brown eyes in vain up at the clock at Victoria, and horse buses built to the design of Father Noah when he left the Ark, and bald-headed Chinks and red-faced chars, and fat ladies who carried string bags, and photographers who did not carry ammonia, poor old Morty was in a very bad way.

He rubbed, and he scrubbed, and he cursed, and at last the bus gave a jolt and a jar; the panting horses stopped straining, the heavy wheels stopped creaking, and the photographer and he got out.

It was a glorious June morning. The air, even in Whitechapel, was sweet at that early hour. God's sky, even in Whitechapel, was a glorious blue. A girl in a blue print dress with a basket of red roses caught Dixon's eye, and she smiled at him. Somehow the happy combination of colour, and the girl's gay look, and the masses of people hurrying hither and thither, and the pure calm blue of the sky, so near and yet so remote, all seized on Mortimer, and his artist soul—never long dormant—suddenly leapt to life.

He forgot all about the chairs and tables in Tottenham Court Road. He forgot all about the stain on the knee of his trousers. He forgot—for, as with all men singled out for ultimate greatness, he was an artist first, and then a lover—he even forgot the dear little woman he was going to marry. The thing he had hated a moment before suddenly took on the semblance of another adventure, which was going to be written by him in the great book of Romance and Life.

His sunny smile sparkled in his blue eyes as he turned to his companion. "What's the address?"

"Man," said the Scotsman, solemnly surveying him, "how should I know?"

"But," cried Dixon, aghast, "the chief said you'd got it."

The grey eyes of the Scotsman stared into the blue eyes with a passion of malice lurking in their granite depths. "You're the writer, I'm only the photographer," he said, with mock humility. "It's true they gave me a paper with a direction, but I left it in my other coat pocket. I didn't even trouble to open it, for I knew I shouldn't need it when I heard I was coming with *you*."

As was his way when any great emotion seized upon him, Dixon's blue eyes dilated until they were almost black. He knew very well what lay behind that explanation and gauged it at its true worth. It was not the first time that

he and the photographer had come to loggerheads. The last encounter they had had the Scotsman had had the worst of it. This was his way of paying Mortimer back.

The two men looked at each other in silence, the sunshine falling on their intent faces ; and the flower girl, from behind her roses, with the shrewdness of her class, curiously watched them both.

“ Will we be going back ? ” said the Scotsman blandly.

“ *You* may go back if you like,” replied Dixon, still eyeing him. “ I’ve got my work to do here.”

“ Man ! you can’t do your work without the address.”

“ Can’t I ? ”

“ How will you get to them if you don’t know where they live ? ”

Dixon’s blue eyes flashed like fire in the sunlight. “ Find out,” he said rudely.

He turned his back on the Scotsman, and without an instant’s hesitation crossed the road to the flower girl, and whipped off his hat.

“ Good-morning. I’m a journalist out on a chase. That fool over there with the camera has lost the address. I’ve got to find a Chinaman who keeps a laundry down this way, and has married an English charwoman.” He bent his head to her with the courtly grace that was as much a part of his physical, as his way of arriving at instant decisions was a part of his mental, make-up. “ I wonder if you can help me to find him ? ”

The flower girl’s pretty, shrewd eyes looked Dixon up and down. Debonair face, alert eyes, mobile mouth, direct speech ; nothing escaped that penetrating glance, from the sole of his immaculate shoes to the crisp kink in his short-cropped hair.

“ There’s lots of Chinks down these parts,” she said slowly, “ and most of the old girls are chars. I could tell you of a dozen, but they mightn’t be the ones you want.”

“ Tell me the dozen. If they’re not the right ones I’ll come back ”—his sunny smile shone out at her—“ and, like *Oliver Twist*, ask for more ! ”

Undoubtedly, the devil’s own luck was with him ! The flower girl’s young man had aspirations in the ways of the higher walks of literature, and Dickens was his god of the moment, as interpreted through the medium of *Oliver Twist*. The pretty eyes danced with sudden sympathy and delighted

comprehension. "What," she cried, "do *you* like Mr Dickens too?"

"I adore him."

"They're reading about little Oliver up at the Penny Readings," said the flower girl. She rubbed her hands on her apron, rose from her seat on an upturned soap-box, and hitched her hands on to her sides. "Right-o! I'll give you the addresses as they come to me, and, if they don't turn up trumps, you come back."

"You're an angel," said Dixon fervently.

So wholesome and clean was the make-up of him as he stood there in the sunlight, that if he had said "darling" instead of "angel," and the Plump Little Party had been there to hear him, I give you my word she would only have laughed.

Before the word was out of his mouth he had whipped out his notebook and pen, and was taking the addresses down. The directions were various, and the remarks interpolated were a kind of running Baedeker—a guide to the morals and the ways of Chinks in general, and Chinks and chars in particular, which would have made those gentlemen who write on such matters from a statistical point of view open their eyes if they had heard her.

The words poured out of the fresh, red lips as if they had been water running out of a pump, but Mortimer Dixon got every one of them. No matter how inapposite, down they went into his notebook, and not into his notebook only. He wrote with his memory as well as his pen. He wrote as if the girl's mouth had been the fountain of all wisdom, and every trivial item, meaningless to most men, was caught at by him and tabulated away for use in the future, in that extraordinary storehouse of facts and fantasies which he was pleased to call his brain.

He took down every word as if he had been reporting the Prime Minister, and if the spirit of old Isaac Pitman hovered in the vicinity of Whitechapel on that glorious June morning, he would have had the pleasure of hearing blessings, instead of curses, invoked on his memory, for once in his life.

When the girl stopped talking then, and then only, Dixon stopped writing, and snapped the elastic band round his notebook with a bang. Hidden away in that queer mass of information, behind those hieroglyphics he called his shorthand, lay matter which many a journalist in a far better

position would have given much to know. In that quarter of an hour spent on the kerbstone he had learned more about Chinamen and their ways in England than if he had lived in China under the auspices of good European society for a year.

His face was radiant as he put his notebook in his pocket and looked down at the girl. "You're an angel," he said, more fervently than ever. "I don't know how to thank you. Perhaps some day I may have the good fortune to serve you."

"P'r'aps you may and p'r'aps you mayn't." She shrugged her shoulders. "Yer never knows yer luck!"

"I do when I see it," said he gallantly. "That's why I came direct to you."

"Oh, go hon!" said the flower girl gaily. Then she looked down at her basket at her feet. "Yer gardy is a bit orf colour. Bin up all night, I s'pose, like you. Want a rose?"

"What do *you* think?"

The girl stooped over her basket. Had Dixon been a woman he would have known by the way her hands lingered over the flowers, picking and choosing the best from the fair, fragrant mass, that if the flower girl had taught the journalist something about Chinks and chars, the journalist had taught the girl something about men and women she had never known before.

She put the rose into his buttonhole as he took the gardenia out. "'Ope you'll find your friends, mister," she said slowly.

"If I do, it'll be thanks to you."

"'Ere, give me that there gardy of yours." She put out her hand. "I can't abide to see flowers thrown into the gutter like dirt."

"The girl I'm going to marry keeps all the flowers I give her in a box made of white satin," said Dixon simply. "I'll give her this rose of yours when I see her this evening. That'll go into the white satin box too." He held out his hand, and the girl put hers timidly into it. "A thousand thanks, and good-bye."

"So long, Oliver; come back if you want more help." She stood an instant looking after him, then she sat down on her upturned soap-box, and put the gardenia out of his buttonhole into the belt at her waist. "'E's the right kind,

'e is," she said to herself. "If he'd offered to pay for that rose I give 'im, I'd a bashed him acrost the fice. That girl o' 'is is one of the lucky ones. 'Ope to Gawd he finds that Chink." She gave a prodigious sigh, and settled down to business again as Dixon disappeared in the crowd.

"What on earth have you been doing all this time?" said the photographer angrily.

"*Your* business," snapped Dixon. He had just caught sight of the stain on his trousers, and his hot temper surged up again.

"*My* business!" The Scotsman's grey eyes looked contemptuously at the rose in Dixon's buttonhole. "Flirting with East End flower girls."

"Flirting my foot!" said Dixon hotly. Then his conscience smote him; for he had a very tender conscience, hidden away behind that dashing manner of his. "If it wasn't flirting it was something very much like it," he told himself remorsefully, and he made a mighty resolve to repeat every word of the conversation to the Plump Little Party that evening. "Gollypots!" he said to himself. "Morty, my boy, you'd be the very devil with women, if it wasn't for *her*."

Wherein Mortimer Dixon showed his wisdom, for he was right.

His secret sense of his shortcomings, however, was not the photographer's business. You should have seen Dixon glare at that unfortunate individual when he asked him what he had paid for the rose.

"Nothing, you ass."

Also you should have seen that Scotsman's pallid countenance when he heard that reply. "And they call Scotsmen mean," he ejaculated. "A quarter of an hour's information, and a rose into the bargain, and you gave her nothing. Man! I'm no waster of hard-earned money, but I'd have given yon lassie twopence for herself."

"I've no doubt you would," snapped Mortimer; "but then we aren't all Carnegies like you." As he spoke, his quick eye, roving in all directions, alighted on a green-grocer's shop. "One minute," he said to the photographer and disappeared through the door.

"Good-morning, madam." He whipped off his hat and stood in the ill-smelling little shanty, smiling down in his own irresistible way at the fat old lady who answered his

summons. "There's a flower girl with a basket of red roses sitting on the kerbstone across the way. Do you happen to know her?"

"Do I 'appen to know her! Why, she's one of the sights of Whitechapel." The coarse, kindly face broke into smiles. "She's *our* Rose."

Dixon put his hand into his pocket and took out a sovereign. "I want you to change this," he said, holding it out to her, "and in about a quarter of an hour's time send across and buy five bobs' worth of roses from that girl."

The woman's face became as blank as a piece of paper. "Wot's the idea?"

"She's done something for me that I can't offer her money for, and I want to pay her back."

Still the woman did not take the sovereign. "I ain't used to doin' business that way, sir."

"No more am I," said Mortimer gently. "That's why I asked you to do it for me. A good woman can do lots of things for a young girl that a young man can't."

Without an instant's hesitation the greengrocer's wife put out her hand and took the sovereign. "Right, I'll buy the roses for you. Wait here a minute and I'll get the change."

"I'll come back for the change later, if you don't mind. At present I can't afford to wait."

The dull eyes glared again with suspicion. "Why not?"

"I'm a journalist," said Dixon quietly. "I've a fool with a camera waiting outside who has forgotten the address where we've got to go. I'm looking for a Chink and a red-faced charwoman. That little Rose of yours has given me some addresses to try."

The suspicion died away, and the friendly look came back again. "A journalist, are you, and looking for a Chinaman wot's married to a char. You've got your work cut out, mister, if you don't know which one of them you're wanting. There's lots of them abart."

"So I understand. I suppose you don't happen to know of any, yourself?"

"*Me.*" The scorn on the fat, red face would have done credit to a duchess. "*Me* know a char that's married a Chink! I'm a respectable woman, I am. I keeps myself to myself. I'd rather be an old maid twenty times over than

marry a Chinaman. A yellow-faced, pigtailed Chinaman ! I'd die first."

"That's because you don't know what it feels like to run the risk of being an old maid," said Dixon.

"Oh, go hon!" said the greengrocer's wife, like the flower girl before her. "How do *you* know?"

"I'm a man," said Dixon gaily, "although I'm a journalist ; and I've got eyes."

The coarse, red face, which long years ago, before the bitter lessons of poverty and the anguish of five little graves had wrought their way with her, had been young and pretty, became almost young and pretty again. "You've kissed the Blarney stone, you 'ave. Go along do and look for your Chinaman." Then her eyes went to the sovereign she held. "How do you know your change'll be safe?"

Mortimer's young laughter rang through the little dark shop, lightening its dark corners with the sound of its infectious joy. "You dear old soul, because you choose to suspect me is no reason why I'm to suspect you. You buy the roses, and I'll come back for the fifteen bob. If I don't turn up, you'll know that I've killed the Chink, and eloped with the char!" He stepped out into the street, smiling, and the woman watched him from the doorway.

"If I'd a son like 'im," she said bitterly, "there'd be no workkus for the likes o' me." She picked up the sovereign and polished it on the corner of her apron, then she went back to her potatoes and carrots again.

"Do you expect me to stand here waiting all day doing nothing?" inquired the photographer sourly, as Dixon returned.

"Who's asking you to do nothing?" snapped Dixon. He pointed to a little Italian lad sitting on his organ, sharing an apple with his monkey and a parrot. "You'd have taken a snapshot of that and made half-a-guinea for yourself while I've been in there, if you'd had the sense of a snail."

"Man," said the Scotsman, "I never saw it. Wait half-a-tick and I'll snap it at once."

"Snap it if you want to, I'm going to find that Chink."

He shoved his hat on his head and squared his shoulders, as was the way of him when he was off on a chase. "Come on!"

The Scotsman sullenly picked up his camera and his

brown-paper parcel, and followed Mortimer for the best of all reasons : there was nothing else to do.

Dixon, over his shoulder, saw his companion coming. He smiled grimly to himself. "*Beast!*" he said to himself, "I'll lead you a chase!"

By all the gods that look after journalists, he did.

He rushed into pubs, bounced into policemen. He raided A. B. C.'s. He interviewed postmen, greengrocers, grocers, butchers and bakers. If he stopped short at candlestick-makers it was because there were no candlestick-makers in Commerical Road. He tracked every address given to him by the flower girl as if he were a hound after a fox. Into the evil-smelling courts, up the ill-ventilated stairs, down by-streets, through noisome alleys where pallid children played and watched his passing with wondering eyes, that suggested to Dixon's restless imagination pathetic little flowers—up and down he went tirelessly, not speaking, not stopping; neither vouchsafing explanations nor soliciting advice.

And the wretched photographer toiled after him, cursing his camera and his brown-paper bag. He was wasting his time, and he hated waste. He was a delicate man, despite his great stature, and he hated walking. Likewise his boots were new. The sun was fierce, and he hated the heat. All the time he had the address in his pocket, but he would not have given it to Mortimer Dixon to save his life. As he toiled, as he perspired, as he dragged on in misery, every time he looked at that gallant figure in front of him the thought of Dixon's rage when he found out that he had had all his trouble for nothing was dearer to him than money or rest or slippers after the infernal anguish of cheap, ill-fitting boots. "You shall walk, my fine gentleman, till ye drop, and till yer grey gloves are as black as my cuffs. Then I'll show ye yon wee bit of paper and we'll see whose side gets the laugh!"

Meantime the laugh was on Dixon. He was not tired—he was as strong as a horse. He was not too hot—he adored the heat. His boots did not pinch him—catch him! "The most important thing for a journalist after his pen and his notebook," he was wont to say, "is a pair of hand-made boots."

So the chase went on.

Up and down went he, cool, spotless and radiant, with

that strong good humour that, when he was at work, seemed to fall on him like a magic veil cutting him off from hunger, fatigue and irritability, and the thousand and one petty troubles which beset others of his kind when engaged in similar work.

Out of the dozen addresses the flower girl had given him he tracked down eleven. The reason he did not interview the twelfth was because the twelfth was dead, and gone back to China in a lacquered coffin, inset with medallions, to lie in state under a glass canopy in a remote village, there duly to be worshipped by his sons on the days appointed by his gods.

The other eleven who had *not* gone to glory were Chinks, but they were Chinks in inferior positions, sweating humbly for a pittance doled out by their European masters, and either unmarried or mated with lady Chinks of their own persuasion and race.

The Chink Dixon was after was a gay young thing of fifty-seven, who was married by law to an Englishwoman of the charing profession, and ran a laundry on his own.

In addition to these glories, he had inspired a most surprising passion for his youth and beauty in the mind and heart of a pretty young Englishwoman of the respectable middle class.

Mortimer Dixon had her portrait in his pocket, but he did not vouchsafe that piece of interesting information to anyone but himself. As a matter of fact he had no business to have it. He had chanced to light on it lying on the photographer's table, ready for reproduction for the morning papers, and, with characteristic audacity, had blandly appropriated it while waiting for that excellent man to get together his things.

He looked upon it as his last great coup, and he relied on it to turn a possible failure into a certain success. When he had run to earth the Chink he was after, and he denied all knowledge of the Englishwoman as a matter of course, then he would produce the photograph, and watch the face of the char. "*She'll* give the show away, bless her," said Dixon cheerfully, feeling the outline of the picture in his pocket. "Chinky'll look like a saint on a tombstone even if he's got the girl hidden under his pigtail! Chinks always do."

Meantime he interviewed the eleven : the twelfth on the list being dead.

" I wonder if *he* was the one, and has taken the girl and his red-faced char to China with him in his coffin." Dixon's imagination danced round the weird idea with the greatest satisfaction. He had just caught sight of the absolute misery on the photographer's face.

Unhappily his ingenious theory did not fit in with established fact. The dead Chink was well known to three of the living Chinks, and he, like themselves, had not attained to that sublime destiny vouchsafed to the chosen few—a laundry of his own. He had washed, he had ironed, he had goffered and pleated and glazed; but he had toiled with shirts and flannel petticoats apportioned out to him by a master, and now he had gone back dead to the land of his forefathers, and his glazing and his goffering days were done.

" Me vellee solly, mister," said the eleventh Chink, unearthed from the subterranean cellar, where he was washing and ironing delicate lace blouses for a Bond Street firm, when called up to give the information required. " Me vellee, vellee solly, mister ! Me vellee dam solly, mister esquire ! "

" Me vellee dam solly, mister, esquire, sir, too," returned Dixon.

A shilling passed from the grey-gloved hand to the yellow claw, stained and trembling with opium, and Mortimer stepped on to the pavement, leaving the Celestial squinting obliquely, and calling down blessings from high heaven in the shape of fifty sons and one daughter, in a shrill falsetto after him as, followed by the photographer, he went down the street.

Dixon shoved his hat on to the back of his head, thrust his hands into his pockets, and burst into delighted laughter.

" Man," said the Scotsman, surveying him amazingly, " is the sun or the smells too much for ye ! What for are ye laughing as if ye were crazed ? "

" I'm thinking of the fifty sons," cackled Dixon, whose sense of humour had been tickled to death. " I'm going to be married in June."

" I'm thinking ye'll be going back to Fleet Street," returned the Scotsman sourly. " Shall I hail yon bus ? "

Dixon stopped laughing. " What on earth do you want to hail a bus for ? "

" Haven't you had enough of it yet ? "

" Had enough of it," Dixon's finely cut lips shut like a trap. " I've only just begun."

The Scotsman thought of the address lying snug in his waistcoat pocket, and he wavered. Then—he was not a Scotsman for nothing—*his* jaw tightened, and he took up his camera and his brown-paper bag.

" Anyway ye'll be after eating something. I took my breakfast at six this morning and it's now past three."

Dixon took out his watch and looked at it. " Gollypots ! so it is ! " It was no pretence on his part. He was amazed. So keen had he been to run down his quarry he had had no idea of the time. He put back his watch, and, surveying his companion's white countenance, his kindly heart smote him. " It is written that a journalist may not give in, but not that he must starve," he said brightly. " Come on."

" Hadn't we better ask yon policeman where there's a restaurant ? "

" A restaurant, my boots ! You can't eat meat on a day like this in Whitechapel. Let's have eggs and coffee and salad at an A.B.C." He started to walk when the other stopped him.

" Wait while I find a policeman to direct us."

" What do you want a policeman for ? There's an A.B.C. at the end of the street."

" How do you know that ? "

" We passed it on our way."

" I didna see it."

" Ah," said Dixon pleasantly, " you're the kind that sits beside an oasis in Sahara and dies of thirst." He turned on his heel and went off at a brisk pace, the Scotsman behind him glowering as they went.

At the corner, sure enough, there was the A.B.C.

" The oasis," murmured Mortimer Dixon, his eyes twinkling. He ran his eye over the room and, with the unerring instinct of his class, picked out a waitress whose apron was clean, and a table in the draught.

" Two coffees, one salad, two eggs and six buns."

" Man," shrieked the Scotsman, appalled at the lavish order. " I'll have no buns."

" Oh, shut up. *I'm* running this show. You sit down and eat your eggs and your salad and keep quiet. The buns and the coffee are for me."

"I'll no' have salad, and I'll pay for myself."

Dixon winked at the waitress. "Don't you listen to him, but you go and do as I tell you. It isn't his fault, poor thing. He can't help it, he's Scotch." He hung up his hat on the peg behind him, sat down at the little table and beamed at his companion.

Now Dixon was a spendthrift by nature. He knew very well that he ought to have been saving every halfpenny for those chairs and tables, but he could no more help standing treat to other people than he could use his pocket-handkerchief twice. His washing bills were appalling. So were his hospitalities. If there was one thing on earth that he loved better than baths and clean linen, it was giving other people things to eat.

At the thought of the chairs and tables, and the half-pennies he ought to be saving, Dixon's face turned suddenly white. He had forgotten all about the Plump Little Party waiting under the clock. There was not a better or a truer lover in all England. He would have jumped into a burning house and dragged out the girl he loved at the risk of his own life. He would have flung himself forward and snatched her from under the wheels of a motor bus without a second's thought. He would have gone down into the bowels of the earth and torn her out of a flooded mine. He would have jumped over an American liner for the mere pleasure of drowning with her, if she had been silly enough to tumble in. There is nothing on earth he would not have done for her, but he could not help forgetting her when he was at work.

"Oh! my only Aunt Jemina," he shouted. "I've never telephoned to my girl! Gorge away! I'll be back in a jiffy." He jumped for his hat and disappeared like a flash of greased lightning.

"He's mad," said the Scotsman, "mad as the Weaver o' Dumfries!" He dumped his brown-paper bag on to the empty chair, where Dixon had been sitting, and proceeded calmly to eat his salad and eggs.

"The other gentleman gone?" asked the waitress, with surprise in her voice.

"Gone mad," laconically returned her sour-faced customer. He jerked his dirty thumb at the dish she was holding. "Ye can leave the coffee and the buns."

The girl's roguish face flashed into a smile, showing her even, white teeth. "The coffee and the buns are for the

other lunatic," she remarked dryly. "I'll keep them till he comes." She tilted up a chair against the table and went her ways.

In about ten minutes Dixon reappeared.

"The girl I'm going to marry has been waiting under the clock for me at Victoria since half-past ten," he told the waitress, who, the instant he walked in, came forward with the buns. "Poor darling! she didn't get home till three!"

"Is she mad too?" asked the waitress, and her smile, her only beauty, showed her teeth, white and even as Dixon's own.

He surveyed her cheerfully. "All mad! The whole blooming lot of us!" He darted a glance at her hand, where a modest little turquoise cuddled itself up against a little ruby ring. "I'm glad to see another chap's lucky enough to be a madman too." He nodded with gay impudence at the two little rings, and the girl's face flushed a bright pink.

"You sit down and eat your buns. I've got your coffee here, keeping it hot."

"Angel," he remarked fervently. He sat down and attacked the buns. "Why don't you have one?" he mumbled, pushing the plate to the photographer.

"Man," replied that excellent person, "I'm full to the brim o' eggs and salad. I'm no holder o' wicked waste and gluttony. Still, to show there's no ill feeling . . ." He put out his dirty hand, and Dixon inwardly shuddered. He had washed *his* hands at a little barber's shop he had passed on his way from the 'phone. But for the strawberry stain on his trousers, of which he was so painfully conscious—he was thankful to know it hidden under the table—he was as immaculate and as fresh as when he started out.

"Your coffee," said the waitress, handing it over his shoulder.

"My cup runneth over with blessings," said Dixon, pointing with his spoon to the middle, where a blob of yellowish cream whirled round and round. "Who put *that* in?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"It's good for madmen."

The two young people divided by class, education and

thought, so unlike, yet so like, drawn together as by a magnet by their mutual youth and love of life, smiled happily at each other.

"What would *you* do if your friend kept you waiting under the station clock from ten to two?"

"You see me, don't you!" She leant over Mortimer's shoulder, and put two big lumps of sugar into his cup. "Was your young lady very angry?"

Dixon's blue eyes took on a new expression. The hard glitter faded out of them, and they softened until they transformed his face almost to the face of another man. "She's never angry," he said, and the quick ears of the girl noted the change in his voice. "You see, *she understands*." He looked up boyishly at her, and his sunny smile shone out. "I believe," he said, "she would wait all day for me."

"Ay," thought the girl to herself, as she turned to her duties, "if it was you she was waiting for, I shouldn't wonder if she would."

"I 'spose you know it's just on four," remarked the photographer grimly.

Dixon gulped down his coffee at such a rate that he nearly scalded his throat. "Put the buns into a paper bag for me, for the love of heaven," he besought the waitress. He followed her to the counter, and watched her tearing the paper off the peg. "I'm a journalist," he said, with the engaging frankness that no one, man or woman, ever seemed able to withstand. "I'm looking for a place that I don't even know the name of. That fool of a chap who's with me has lost the address. I'm looking for a Chinamen who's run away with a pretty English girl. Her mother's nearly heart-broken with anxiety because, you see, he's a married man already. Heard anything about it?"

The girl shook her head. "Not a word."

"He's a better-class Chink," said Dixon, drawing on his imagination, "with a yellow face, and he's bald-headed, and he's married to an English char. I suppose you can't help me at all?"

Again the girl shook her head. "Wish I could. You'll find it a difficult job. There's lots of that sort about." She totalled up the items on a little slip of paper and handed him his bill.

He paid it and slipped a shilling under his saucer.

"None of that," cried the waitress, pouncing on it like a cat on a mouse. "This isn't the Carlton. Shilling, indeed! If you've got a young lady you ought to be saving up."

"Is that what you tell *him*?" said Dixon, laughing.

"Never you mind what I tell *him*, do what I tell *you*," returned the waitress. "Take your shilling and give me tuppence. That's *my* mark."

"Make it a threepenny bit," said Dixon cordially. He fished the tiny coin out of his waistcoat pocket and held it out to her. "Keep it for luck!"

"Right-o," said the waitress, laughing. "I'm a believer in luck, I am."

He laughed back to her. "So am I."

They nodded gaily at each other and parted, rather like two good comrades than strangers who had never set eyes on each other before.

"You seem to make friends pretty easily," growled the photographer.

"Yes," returned Dixon. "Thank God I do."

There was no question about it. He did. Of all his many gifts—he *had* many gifts, although his enemies were wont to say of him that he only had one, which was *bounce*—this gift of making friends easily was perhaps his greatest. Pushful Dixon was by nature; but it was not push. He was resourceful; but it was not resource. He had dash and daring and bounce, but it was not any of those three characteristics—excellent qualities though they be for a journalist—that marked him out in his relations with men and women. It was himself.

A something that cannot be described. A something that cannot be learned. A something that cannot be acquired. A something, innate and deep-lying, undreamed of by many, unguessed at, sometimes, even by himself; still, *there*. A dormant power, a delicate sympathy, an overflowing confidence in other people's kindness, most of all an overwhelming kindness towards other people in himself. There was something of the child in him. He bubbled over with the utmost simplicity wherever he went, taking it for granted that everyone he met was as interested in him as he was in them.

And he *was* interested! It did not matter whether they were good or bad, clever or stupid, rich or poor, he always found something in them all which appealed to him. He

lacked many things, God knows, but one thing he had had bestowed on him so greatly that it amounted almost to genius—a passion for human beings. He did not think about them. He did not preach about them. He did not want to improve or teach them, or change them! He just loved them as they were.

He plumped his bill down on the ledge of the counting house, paid it, and went out.

The chase began again.

CHAPTER II

Up and down! Up and down! Down and up! Down and up! For three mortal hours they tracked and sweated, and the photographer cursed, and Mortimer Dixon laughed. But neither laughing nor cursing could help them. They found nothing at all. Blank faces, stone walls, blind streets that led to nowhere! Information and directions as to the whereabouts of everything and everyone under the sun, but of the man they were looking for, not a word.

The yellow-faced Chinaman who had married the red-faced char, and abducted the pretty young English girl from her mother, for all they could get to hear of him, had either never existed at all, or had vanished clean from off the face of the earth.

“Man,” said the photographer, “it’s striking seven. I’m going home to bed.”

“Go, Pretty Love!” cried Dixon scornfully. “What surprises me is that you ever get up.”

“Will you no’ be coming too?” asked the Scotsman.

“Me!” Dixon’s blue eyes flamed with a passion that the other recognised, but could not understand. “Me go home and go to bed at seven! Man alive! I don’t budge from here till I find him, if I take up my abode in White-chapel until I’m dead.”

His companion stared at him in amazement. He was so young. He was so gay. He was so full of courage, and self-confidence, and the joy of life. Almost the look on that handsome young face touched the dour Scotsman. His hand stole to his pocket almost without knowing it. Almost without his knowing it his long fingers closed on the card. In another instant the dirty piece of paper with the

address on it would have been Mortimer's! But as luck would have it, he chose that very instant to throw back his head and laugh.

"Gollypots!" he shouted, "you should see yourself! You weren't over-clean when you started, but now you can't see your pretty face for smuts."

The photographer dropped the card back into his pocket as if it had burnt him, "Not if it loses me my place, ye sha'n't have it!" he said to himself, "ye lassie-loving, bawbee-chucking Englishman! If needs be, I'll starve, but I won't give you the address." He picked up his camera and his brown-paper parcel, and strode away, without flinging Dixon even so much as a word.

"Thank God for that," thought Mortimer Dixon piously. "Let's hope before he goes to his downy couch he'll treat himself to a wash!"

At the thought he ran his eye along the street, searching for a place where he could find soap and water himself. It was seven, and though he would have died rather than acknowledge it, he was not only hungry and sticky, but he was pretty nearly tired out himself. He took off his straw hat, and the soft evening breeze, still hot from the scorching day, came gratefully on to his flushed cheeks and his well-cropped head.

He looked up and down the street at the countless hundreds of people, insignificant individuals to the casual eye of the beholder, yet each one a miracle, carrying within his own soul and body the divine possibilities of the Godhead within him, unhinted at, unguessed at, except by those who loved him. Hundreds and hundreds of individuals, rushing and tearing home from their work—unsatisfying, body-stunting, soul-destroying work!—back to the miserable little rooms which they called *home*, to eat and sleep to gain strength for the morrow to rise and go forth to work again!

"If a hundred of them dropped dead, what would it matter!" thought Mortimer Dixon. "In five minutes there'd be two hundred to take their places again. Not one of us missed. Not one of us necessary. All of us striving, and working, and slaving for nothing, and in the end to become dust and ashes, or perhaps—who knows?—rise in a new world, with a new body, in order to work again. What's the good of it! Why do we do it! We know what the end

has to be. Why don't we all sit down and make an end of it at once!"

One of those unaccountable moments of agonising depression to which he was liable swept over him as he stood on the pavement looking up and down the street. They were the penalty of his temperament. They were the price exacted as just payment for his gift of imagination, and the extraordinarily acute perceptiveness of his brain.

Highly strung, hungry, depressed, overtired, he stood there forgetful of his mission, and watched the stream of humanity flooding by. He forgot the hour; he forgot his work; he forgot the keen ardour of the chase; he stood there lost in thought, his soul vainly exercising the preordained privilege of finite man, daring to question the mysteries of Infinite God.

As he stood there, the bells from a neighbouring church began to peal softly, and the setting sun in his gorgeous magnificence, a symbol of the divine power that had called it into being out of chaos, suddenly shone out. The soft clamour of the bells calling the faithful to prayer and the glory of the heavens fell on his downcast spirit, even as the glory of God had fallen on those downcast spirits of old on the day of Pentecost, enveloping him in its mystic mantle of fire.

The thought of the woman he loved came to him, almost like an answer to an unspoken prayer. Her sweet voice, her tender ways, the beautiful faith of her in him, and for him, swept over his spirit like a life-giving wind in the parched desert, restoring his soul to life. How she loved him! How she trusted him! How wonderful was her belief that there was nothing he could not do! Over the roar of Whitechapel and its millions he could hear her soft voice saying to him: "Of course you can do it, Morty! There's *nothing* you can't do."

The depression fell from Dixon as suddenly as it had seized him. From that extraordinary moment of spiritual experience, snatched, as it were, from the hand of God, he came forth like a man renewed. His hunger was gone. His thirst was gone. Now he was no more tired than he was when he had started out fresh from his bed. The exhilaration which always followed with reactionary footsteps on those moods of despair rushed in on him, restoring him to his own. The clamouring bells, the clanging wheels, the

whistling cars, the raucous cries, all leapt together in a transfusion of sound, rushing up to the sun like a pæan of praise.

He looked at the sky. It was like flame. He looked at the streets. They were transmuted to living gold. He looked at the rose in his coat, and its faint, sweet fragrance caught his keen senses with a rapture that was almost pain.

“*Ave, Cæsar! morituri te salutant!*” Dying,” he said to himself exultantly, “it praises God.”

His thoughts went speeding back to the flower girl, the giver of the rose. “You fool,” he said to himself, “standing there wasting time, asking ass questions to which there’s no answer, when there’s work to do. That’s the girl who is going to help you, you old blitherer! What does it matter if the addresses she gave you are not the right ones? Go back, you idiot, and ask her to give you some more.”

On the thought he turned, and there, as if his need of her had called her away from her trading, stepping towards him out of that riot of light and colour, he saw the girl.

Her face was soiled. Her hat was askew. Her hair was done up in Hinde’s curlers. She was just an ordinary, tawdry, vulgar little Whitechapel flower girl, but her eyes were beautiful. They were alight with joy and eagerness as she came towards him. To Dixon she was more welcome than an angel from heaven, as she came up to him with her empty basket over her arm.

“Found him?” she cried.

“No, worse luck!”

“I ‘ave! the minute you’d gone I thought of him! I’m a nice fool, ain’t I!”

“You’re an angel,” cried Dixon, with surpassing conviction.

“It was you bought five bobs’ worth of my roses, wasn’t it?”

“Who told you that?”

“I’m not the kind wot needs telling.” She nodded at the empty basket over her arm and looked up at him through her black lashes. “I thought as much.”

“You weren’t angry?”

“Not arf.” She fumbled in the bodice of her dress, and took out a dirty piece of paper. “That’s where your Chink lives.”

He seized it like a lion scenting his prey. “Tell me the way to go.”

"First to the right; second to the left; up the alley; down the steps; out at the end; into the court, through the archway and the laundry's in the basement, and there ye are." The quick words, poured out as fast as she could speak them, recorded themselves like a phonograph making a record on Mortimer Dixon's brain. "Got it?"

"Yes."

"Certain?"

"Certain."

"Right-o; then I'm orf."

"One minute." He laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"If this turns out right it'll be a big thing for me. I'd like it to be a big thing for you too."

"Go hon!"

"To please me," Dixon's voice had never been more persuasive. "I'd love to send you something. We're partners in this, you know. It's only fair."

"Honest Injun?" The dark eyes flashed behind her black lashes.

"Honest Injun."

"Then I'll tell yer—a pink fevver."

"A pink feather. Pale or dark?"

"Pale."

"Long or short?"

"What do *you* think! Long."

"Lying down or standing up."

"What a one ye're for asking questions. Lyin' down."

"Right-o; give me your address."

She gave it him simply as a child. "Better write it down."

"I never write things down; I sha'n't forget."

The bright dark eyes danced in the sunlight. "It's for my weddin' at."

"I'll come and dance at your wedding if I may."

"Do yer mean it? Reely! Right-o; I'll let you know. Solong! I'm off to see my chap!"

For the second time that day Dixon bared his hand and held hers in his own. "Pale pink, and long, and lying down," he said to her. "God bless you, and good-bye."

Hat in hand, he stood looking after her. At the corner of the street she turned and waved, and he waved back again. Then London swallowed her up, and Mortimer Dixon,

clutching at the dirty piece of paper as if it were a jewel of priceless value, rushed off the opposite way.

CHAPTER III

FIRST on the right, second on the left ; up the alley ; down the steps ; out at the end into the court. . . . The archway appeared, and Dixon's heart began to thump. " And the laundry's in the basement. . . ." His eye went up and down the houses in the court, calculating in which of its underworld cellarage he should corner his find.

Oddly enough, however, not one of the houses had a basement attached.

He stood in the middle of the little court, and his eyes went up and down. The children, attracted by the presence of a stranger, left their tops and their treasures of wood and string, and encircled him, staring at him with all their eyes.

" Know of any house up here that's got a basement? " he said, addressing one of them.

The child stared back at him with the vague, uninterested stare of uneducated, unloved childhood, and solemnly sucked her thumb.

" Any of you got a cellar in this court? " he said to a likely-looking lad. He caught him by the shoulder and turned him round.

" Not as I ever heard tell of."

Dixon produced a sixpence. " Come now," he said persuasively, dropping into the vernacular. " Ain't nobody got a cellar in this yere court? "

The children pressed round him, looking at the sixpence shining in the sunlight, and with regretful, passionate eagerness shook their heads. On each of their pinched little prematurely old countenances was written a mad desire for cellars and sixpences, heartrending to see.

" Tell yer wot," said Dixon, " I wants to find a Chink wot lives in a cellar in this yere court." He added a shilling to the sixpence, and a little thrill ran through the awe-stricken group. " Here's a bob for the Chink, and a tanner for the cellar." He paused impressively. The children gasped, but no beautiful light of intelligence dispelled the passion of greed written on their young faces. They huddled still closer together and shook their heads.

A kind of terror seized Mortimer Dixon. The thought that after all his hopes might once more be dashed to the ground made him feel physically sick. "Well, well," he said wearily, "I s'pose it isn't your fault that you can't produce Chinks and cellars to order. Here you are, kids." He threw the silver coins to the two biggest children, who dexterously caught them. "Go and buy yourselves lolly-pops, you poor little old-fashioned mites, and"—he raised his finger and shook it at them impressively—"see that you play fair."

The crowd parted to let him through and, intent as if watching a new game, the children followed him as once again he went round the court.

"First to the right; second to the left; up the alley; down the steps; out at the end of the court; through the archway; and the laundry's in the basement."

He repeated the directions to himself, over and over, like a child conning a lesson, then he stopped short and looked at the archway.

It was old. It was broad. Its grey stones, unlike the brick and mortar hovels surrounding it, told a story of an ancient glory that had passed away. Possibly, in those bygone years, it had once reared itself towards the heavens the outer walls of a great nobleman's mansion. Who should say!

Then, if once part of a house, why not part of a basement!

He turned on the children, and roughly bade them go back to their game. "Go and buy your sweets," he commanded them.

In an instant the place was cleared, and he stood in the courtyard alone.

He looked up above at the darkening sky. He looked round at the poverty-stricken houses, and he wondered what histories of tragedy, and sorrow, and passion, even of crime, they might hold. He was no coward, but, as he crept forward stealthily into the black shadows of the archway, he caught himself thinking of the malignant mysteries hidden in a Chinaman's eyes.

He crept forward, and his heart went thump. There were the steps—grey, shallow, stone steps, worn down to the raw edges by the countless feet that had patiently borne their burdens of human bodies up and down. An old mat, dirty

and torn, lay carelessly across them, either cast down as not worth keeping, or placed there with some sinister design. Whatever the motive, it lay so that it concealed the steps as effectually as if it had been a door. A hundred people could have passed the place without ever suspecting that it concealed an entrance to some place hidden underneath.

He crept forward a little farther, and looked closer at the mat. What the original colour had been it was impossible to say, but in the one untorn corner was a dreary old dragon rampant. His heart nearly jumped. No matter what its condition, the origin of that mat was Chinese. He took off his gloves, and pulled the mat slowly towards him, bending forward, looking down the steps.

At the bottom, looking up towards him out of the darkness, his figure enshrouded in a kind of kimono, stood a Chinaman. Motionless, like a figure of doom, he stood at the bottom of the flight of steps staring up at the Englishman, and the Englishman, holding on to the mat, the blood coursing through his veins so quickly that it almost suffocated him, knelt on the grey flagstones, forgetting all about his immaculate grey trousers, and stared back.

For a long, long moment the two men stared at each other. East and West, moulded in the same form, actuated by the same passions, animated by the same desires, separated only by one short flight of stairs, yet set apart, the one from the other, by thought, belief and morality, as absolutely as if they belonged to different worlds.

Suddenly the Chinaman vanished. Without a sound, without any apparent movement, he disappeared. One second he was there, and the next he was not. One moment Dixon was looking at a fellow-creature, and the next he was staring at nothing.

Without an instant's hesitation he snatched away the mat, and was slipping down the stairs.

There was no banister to hold by, and Dixon, impetuous though he was, was far too fine a statistician not to realise the value of an unbroken head.

He sat down on the topmost step and swung his long legs over, and as he bumped from stair to stair the thought of his grey trousers, so fresh, so clean, put him into such a passion that his own personal danger and what might lie waiting for him, the secret knife leaping out of the hanging sleeves, the deadly hands which might pin him down when

he got to the bottom—troubled him not a jot. At that moment it was his business to bump down the stairs into that filthy cellar. So he bumped.

The last bump was tremendous. One of the stone steps must have been worn away. It gave him quite a shock as he arrived at the bottom; but he was on his feet in a moment, trying to take his bearings, and find the exit by which the Chinaman had gone.

The cellar—if cellar it was—was pitch black. The only ray of light that penetrated into the subterranean depths came from the small aperture through which he had come, and it had been covered by the mat.

For a second time that afternoon he hesitated. That he had found the man he was looking for was to his mind a certainty; but as to what kind of reception awaited him, of that he was by no means so sure. No one had the faintest idea where he had gone. Days might elapse before anyone took the trouble to inquire why he did not turn up. Pleasing pictures of himself, gagged, bound, left helpless to starve in the cellar at his leisure, cinematographed themselves with delightful rapidity on his highly receptive brain. Obviously, the common-sense plan was to go in search of a policeman before he penetrated any farther into that dark and dreary place. "And old Chinky scoot while I fetch him," thought Mortimer grimly. "Mmm yes! *Twice!*"

He wagged a hand towards the opening with its little streak of light. "Good-bye old sun! if I don't see you again, it won't be my fault!" With his hands thrust out before him, he stepped as unconcernedly forward into the darkness, as if he were crossing the street.

To his surprise he encountered no wall.

"It must be a storage cellar," he said to himself. He looked back over his shoulder in the direction of his steps, and by the glimmering of the decreasing light he calculated that he must have advanced several yards.

"The beastly thing may run under the street for miles," he told himself aggrievedly. "If I go any farther I shall be lost. If I strike a match, Chinky'll clear." He stood still, weighing the advantages and the disadvantages of the situation, and as he stood a sense of heat began to make itself perceptibly felt.

Now Dixon loved heat when combined with fresh air, with

a passionate ardour, but heat combined with stuffiness was a thing he loathed. "That's not natural heat," he said to himself. "That's heat that comes either from gas, or from fire." He stood perfectly still, sensing the increasing temperature, and, as he stood, he gradually became aware of the most extraordinary smell.

As every psychologist knows, a highly strung temperament is almost invariably accompanied by hyper-acute perceptions of hearing, seeing, tasting and smelling. Dixon had nothing to complain of either with regard to his eyes, his ears or his palate, but, to put it in his own choice language, he was a perfect devil when it came to his nose. So highly developed was that particular organ of his that he could differentiate smells in the most ludicrously incomprehensible way.

For instance, he would tell a dozen men sitting in the same room the different soaps they had used when they last washed. Out of a dozen cups of tea poured out in his absence he could tell, without tasting, which cups had been filled from the same pot. Give him a score of matches and he would, provided they did not come in contact with each other, classify them at a sniff into the different makers' boxes to which they belonged. He stood in the darkness and inhaled the fumes of that strange and secretive odour. For once, however, his nose was at fault.

"What the devil is it?" he asked himself, sniffing the while. "It's gas . . . it's boiling water . . . it's soap. . . ." He turned his face in the other direction. "It's cedar-wood." He lifted his head, and his delicate nostrils dilated like a bloodhound's nearing the scent. "Or is it *spices*?" Then all of a sudden, as was the way with him, he jumped to the inspiration. "*Blitherer!*" he said to himself with scorn unspeakable. "*Blitherer!* Gas, boiling water, soap . . . the laundry. Cedar wood, cloves, spices . . . Chinky's coffin!" His eyes flashed fire in the darkness. "Gollypots! what a fool I am!"

With his hands outstretched in front of him, he turned on his heel and ran forward into the blackness. And, as he ran, his heart panted with the sheer joy of the audacity of the thing, his ears cocked like a terrier's, his nose tilted in the right direction as sure and certain as if he were a bloodhound following a track of blood! The love of the chase

was strong within him. He actually shook with an obsession of curiosity as he ran.

At that instant his hands came in sharp contact with an obstacle and he gripped hold as hard as he knew how.

"Now my gloves match my trousers," he said to himself, grinning like a mischievous boy. "I'll do the lot up in a parcel, and send them round with my love to my friend, the photographer, to-morrow morning, in a brown-paper bag!"

It is a gift of the gods to have a temperament like Mortimer Dixon's. There he was, with his life in his hands, placing himself, for all he knew, in a position of such jeopardy that he might never emerge from it alive, chuckling to himself over a practical joke which he might possibly never be able to carry out, for the simple reason that on the next day he might be dead.

"It's a *wall*," he said to himself, triumphantly feeling the surface. "It's a wall."

Gingerly he approached his nose and sniffed delicately. No doubt about it, the combined smells, which he had classified in his own mind under the succinct heading of "Chinky-Stinky," were far stronger than they had been a moment before.

"The laundry's behind that wall," he nodded his head decisively, as though he had seen it—"and opium and Chinks, and chars and coffins!" He ran his two hands over the walls. "High walls, thick walls, stone walls, wet walls. Steam," muttered Dixon. "Steam from the washing." He moved forward sharply into the darkness. The wall seemed to give under his hand, and its texture changed as if by magic into a substance so pliant, so soft, so unexpected, that in spite of himself he let go his hold, so great was the shock.

"What the devil can it be?" He whipped off his gloves, and put his hands softly out into the darkness. "Gollypots! *Velvet!*"

With an anguish of expectation, like a blind man feeling coins to see if they were silver or gold, he stretched his long arms upwards, tiptoeing to his utmost height, running his hand from side to side, and up and down.

A velvet curtain! He stood stock-still with the sheer surprise of it. "Gollypots! what's he got hidden behind?"

He took hold of the curtain with a hand as steady as if he had been opening his own front door. It parted noise-

lessly and in another instant he stood on the threshold of the inner room.

Never as long as he lives will Mortimer Dixon forget the sight that met his eyes. It stamped itself in every detail upon his memory so keenly that it would last him for the remainder of his life.

The room into which he stood looking was fitted up as a laundry. It was low. It was long. It was narrow. In the extreme corner, partitioned off, was a copper heated by gas. Pendent from the ceiling hung long tubes connecting the irons with the apparatus for heating them. They reminded him of snakes. Down the centre of the room ran a long, narrow table, formed of two trestles, on which the ironing was done. Two great gas-jets, enclosed in zinc safety guards, flared to their fullest height. From side to side of the room were stretched long lines of cording, on which hung every conceivable article of women's clothes. Exquisite clothes they were, as his sharp eyes informed him at the first glance. Delicate muslins. Dainty cambrics. Filmy laces. Garments used only by the most luxurious of rich women. His imagination, leaping westwards, showed him those spoilt darlings of fortune in their beauty and in their laces, and he wondered grimly to himself what they would say if they knew that their exquisite apparel, returning in those spotless boxes lined with silk and perfumed with their own sachets, had been washed and ironed in a Whitechapel cellar like this.

By the long, narrow table with an iron in his hand, delicately manipulating a fragile blouse, stood a Chinaman.

His face was yellow. His spare body was robed in a loose white garment tied round the middle with a piece of tape. His arms, bare to the shoulders, were thin to emaciation, but the muscles stood out on them like thick cords. His pigtail hung down his back, black and glossy as a woman's hair. His face, thin and delicate as the fabric he was ironing, was as spotless as the garment he wore.

"Gollypots!" said Dixon to himself, surveying him. His eyes took in the gleaming white boards of the table, the shining irons, the dazzling white of the starch-bowls, and they softened approvingly. "Chink or no Chink, he's *clean!*"

A sudden rush of irresponsible good spirits rushed over him. He felt as pleased as a child with a new toy.

"Hullo, John!" he said cheerfully, nodding at the Chinaman. "Wash me a pair of trousers while I wait?"

The Chinaman lifted his iron, placed it carefully on the stand, turned his head slowly and looked at Mortimer Dixon. His eyes, in their oblique darkness, held a depth of expression so different from anything Dixon had anticipated that he met them with a feeling which was almost akin to a shock.

"Tickee-tickee." The Celestial held out his delicate hand.

"Ticket?" repeated Dixon blankly.

"No tickee-tickee, no washee-washee."

"Then I'm afraid it's no washee-washee, John. It'll have to be dirtee-dirtee, dammee-dammee, instead!" Dixon took his hat off his head and gaily advanced into the room.

With the superb indifference of his kind, the Chinaman picked up his iron, and returned to his work.

"What price cashee-cashee?" Dixon put his hand into his pocket, and pulled out a handful of loose change.

The Chinaman did not even look at it. "No tickee-tickee, no washee-washee." He ran the shining iron over the delicate laces with as much indifference as if he had been peeling potatoes. Dixon, who had a passion for seeing new things and loved a standard of perfection in others with almost the same ardour as he loved it in himself, stood and watched the operation, performed with the ease of a master, with fascinated eyes.

"So customers have to bring tickets, have they!" he thought to himself grimly. "Ho! Ho! Other things are washed in this laundry besides shirts and flannel petticoats, or I'm a Chinaman!" He eyed the Chinaman affably with dancing eyes.

"No washee-washee, eh?" he cried gaily. "Then suppose we do a little talkee-talkee!" As he spoke, he caught sight of an old three-legged stool in the corner, and he jerked his thumb towards it. "Mindee-mindee me sittee-sittee?"

The Chinaman shrugged his shoulders. "Me no belong topside stool."

"Good," said Dixon genially; "then I can sit down without asking leave." He shoved his hat on the back of his head, crossed the room and sat down. "My name's Dixon. I'm a journalist. I'm looking for a Chinaman who's married to an English charwoman, and has run away with a pretty,

respectable English girl." He stopped short and looked at the Chinaman calmly ironing. "If I'm not very much mistaken, my dear John, I'm looking for *you*."

There was a dead pause. The two bright tin kettles on the top of the copper hissed in unison, making a sad, strange, little tune.

"Yes," repeated Dixon affably, "if I'm not very much out in my reckoning, my gay old washerwoman, I'm looking for *you*."

The Chinaman, as though this intruder had never even opened his mouth, stood his iron back on to the gas, and went over to the fire, and stirred it.

"In the first place," said Dixon softly, addressing the wall, "the man I'm looking for is a highly experienced ironer, and runs a laundry of his own."

The Chinaman poked the fire, shut the door under the copper, and returned to the table. "Topside laundry no belong *me*."

"In the second place," proceeded Dixon, drawing with superb recklessness on his imagination, "the man I'm looking for belongs to the upper classes of Chinese society. He is over here for political purposes and only runs his laundry as a blind."

The Chinaman plucked down some of the spotless white tissue paper hanging above him, and began delicately manipulating it into the sleeves of the fragile blouse. "Me no belong topside Fan Tan! Me low—welly low—Ching-Ching washboy."

The words were not out of his mouth before Dixon was off his stool and had seized the Chinaman's pigtail in his hand. "Then, why do you wear your own hair?"

"You low dammee Inglissman, touchee my pigtail!" The delicate face, whose every mark of high breeding would have betrayed his secret at a glance to the eye of a Mongolian observer, thrust itself into Mortimer Dixon's, distorted with rage. "Me burnee dam belong hand off-off!" He snatched at the iron on the stand, and in another instant Mortimer Dixon's hand would have been seared to the bone, when a scream rang through the room.

"*John!*" The black velvet curtains were torn asunder, and a red-faced, stout Englishwoman with a black bonnet on her head, and a basket covered with a spotless white cloth over her arm, half hidden beneath her grey shawl,

hurled herself with the violence of a bomb into the room.

The apparition was so overwhelmingly unexpected that Dixon, in his surprise, let go his hold of the Chinaman's hair.

The instant his hand relaxed, the Chinaman snatched up his pigtail, and coiled it round and round his head. "Airpin." He extended his shaking hand to the woman.

"Yes, yes, deary! There! There! You'll make yourself ill if yer goes on so. There! There! Let lovey-dovey do it for yer!" She set down her basket, and taking some hairpins out of her apron pocket, placed them tenderly in the Chinaman's hair. Then, throwing back her shawl, she advanced on Dixon, her fat arms akimbo. "And who may you be, mister?" she demanded truculently.

"My name's Dixon, and I'm a journalist."

"And what do you want with my man?"

"I want him to come along with me."

"Wot for?" She untied the strings of her bonnet, and threw it on the floor with a jerk, revealing her short, dark, curly hair.

"That's *his* business."

"And, pray, ain't his business my business? Ain't I his wife? I'm a respectable married woman, I am!"

"I never doubted it for an instant," said Dixon, smiling down at her in his own irresistible way.

But, for once in his life, his smile did not prove irresistible. The woman had not any eyes for him and his smiling. With a fierce concentration of emotion that almost ennobled the vulgarity of her countenance, she glued her eyes on the man she claimed as her husband, as though her whole soul depended for its existence on his throwing her one kind word. "Why didn't you tell the gentleman we was married, John?"

"Me no understand, lovey-dovey. Me no speak Ingliss velly well." With a gesture, inimitable in its elegant grace, the Chinaman lifted the fat, red hand, and kissed the tips of her clumsy fingers, Mortimer Dixon watching the amazing scene the while. "You 'splain laundry belong Ingliss boss. Me no wantee go 'long."

"Don't you worry; lovey-dovey'll explain." Dixon could hardly believe his eyes, the harsh voice was so soft and sweet. "You go on with yer work. Don't you worry yer 'ead."

The Celestial picked up his iron and returned to his laces,

and his wife turned to Dixon. "And now, p'raps, you'll be good enough to explain what it is you want with my 'usbind."

"I want you to answer two or three questions."

"Arst away. Who's stoppin' yer."

"First," said Dixon suavely, "I want to know how long your husband has been in London."

"Four years."

"He speaks English very well, doesn't he?"

"Yus, he does." She caught her breath, and her face changed abruptly. "That is, well for a foreign gentleman. He makes the most awful bloomers, same as he did with you just now."

"He's a kind husband, isn't he?"

"What business is that of yours, I should like to know!" the woman flared out at her questioner. Then her face changed again, and her anger, short-lived as it was sharp, died away. "Yus, 'e is. 'E's the most hexcellent 'usbind; strict teetotal; 'ard workin'; no lady could want a better 'usbind than 'im. I've tried three, and 'e's worth the lot of 'em put together; yus, 'e is."

"And you live here with him?"

"Yus, I do." Again the inexplicable change came over her, like the dropping of a mask. "Leastways, sometimes I does, and sometimes I doesn't; it depends on my work."

"Oh, so you don't help in the laundry?"

"No, I don't. I'm a char."

"And I suppose you often bring your husband some of your customers' work?"

"No, I don't." She caught herself up again in the same way as before. "Leastways, sometimes I do; it depends."

"On your customers?"

"On 'im. If 'e ain't busy, I brings home washing. If 'e is busy, I don't."

"I see you've brought home some washing with you to-night," remarked Dixon innocently.

The woman pounced on the basket and clutched it to her beneath her shawl. "You see a good deal more than you're paid to, young man," she retorted rudely.

"There's panic in those eyes," Dixon said to himself. "There's something inside that basket she doesn't want me to see."

"Are you living at home now, or are you at work?"

"I'm living at 'ome." The change more marked than ever, she caught her breath again as if a gag had been thrust into her mouth. "Leastways, I shall be in a day or two. At present, as it 'appens, I'm out at work."

Dixon looked over at the Chinaman, who had finished his ironing and with fragile, dexterous fingers was pinching up a lace frill, delicately moistening it from time to time with a yellowish liquid like a thick paste, which stood beside him in a blue china bowl.

"You don't arf like arstin questions, do yer! *I don't think*. Anythink more! Don't be bashful; spit it out."

Dixon took out his notebook with a professional air. "Your husband's name, please."

"There was a pause. The woman glanced uncertainly at the Chinaman. "My 'usbind's name?"

"Lo Ling See," the shrill, high voice, with its peculiar, indefinable quality of good breeding, struck on Mortimer's eager ears, cutting the air waves between them almost with the sharpness of a knife.

"And yours?"

The woman tossed her head angrily. "You're a nice one arstin' a married lady wot her nime is when you've just heard her 'usbind's. Same as 'is, of course. That all?"

"Look here," said Mortimer Dixon quietly, "it's no good your getting into a rage with me. You don't suppose I've come all this way to poke my nose into your business to please myself, do you? I assure you I don't find it at all interesting standing in this hot cellar, asking people questions about their private affairs which don't concern me in the least."

"Then *why* do you stand there?" the woman asked passionately.

"Because I must. I'm a journalist. I've been sent here by the editor of my paper to try and find a Chinaman who runs a laundry of his own, who is married to an English charwoman, and who has run away with a respectable English girl."

"And wot's that got to do with 'im and me?"

"Well, he is a Chinaman, isn't he?"

"Who said 'e wasn't?"

"And he has got a laundry, hasn't he?"

"Who said 'e hadn't?"

"And he is married to you, isn't he?"

“ Who said he isn't ? ”

Dixon shrugged his shoulders. “ Well, there you are ! I'm looking for a Chinaman who has a laundry, and has married an English charwoman, and I find this, and him, and you——” He stopped short.

“ But you ain't found the girl.” The words were so violently spoken they were like a blow.

“ No ; but I'm going to.”

“ Well, you won't find her 'ere. Not if you look all your life.”

“ I'm not so sure of that.”

“ But I am.” She looked at Dixon triumphantly. “ She ain't here to find.”

“ But that doesn't say you don't know where she is.”

“ Well, I don't. You may take me into any court you like and I'd swear it on the Book ! Gawd strike me dead, if I know where the girl is.”

“ But *he* may ! ”

With a movement so alert that it took Dixon by surprise, the charwoman flung herself in front of her husband. “ 'E don't ! 'E don't ! 'E don't ! 'E knows no more about that girl than I do. I'll take my oath to it. Do yer, John ? ” She turned with passionately appealing hands to the Chinaman, who, throughout the storm which had been raging round him, had calmly continued his work. “ You've not run away with a respectable English girl, 'ave yer ? ”

The Chinaman's answer was curious. He lifted a saucer full of small pins from the table in front of him, and broke it on the floor. Then he spat on the other side of it. “ No.”

Mortimer Dixon remembered that once in an English court he had seen a Chinaman accused of some petty crime, and the interpreter had explained to the magistrate that a saucer must be fetched and broken before the denial of the accused man could be held good. “ It's a formula of the Chinese law, my lord,” the interpreter had said, “ and means to a Chinaman what kissing the Bible means to a Christian witness.”

“ There, d'yer see,” the charwoman screamed. “ 'E wouldn't have done that, if 'e 'ad. I tell yer he's the best 'usbind in London ; strict teetotal ; 'ard working and as good as gold to me. 'E ain't ran off with any of your English hussies. What should he want a pretty girl for ? Ain't he got *me* ? ”

Truly the sublime and the ridiculous lie close together in this life. So supreme was the woman's belief in her husband, so pathetic her total ignoring of her own lack of personal charm, that Dixon, whose sense of humour was always so keen, did not even feel inclined to smile. He just stood and looked at the pair of them, and once again, as so often before, he wondered at the potency of that divine magic which men called Love.

"Well," he said slowly, "it may be as you say, and I hope that it is. I shall give your address to the police, who will verify your statements in due course. As far as I'm concerned, I've done all I wanted to do."

"Oh, you 'ave, 'ave yer! Is there nothink more you'd like to ask?"

"Nothing more, thank you."

"And thank *you* kindly for nothing." Taken off her guard, she put her basket down on the stool, and stooped for her bonnet, which was lying on the floor.

"I'll see what's inside that basket if I die for it," Dixon said to himself. He made a quick, sharp movement forward and, as if by accident, lurched against the stool on which it stood.

Over went the stool, and over went the basket. The white cloth gave with the impetus, and out on to the floor tumbled the contents. A roast fowl, a roll of French bread, a pat of butter, an open strawberry tart, a pot of cream and a bottle of champagne.

If they had been so many sticks of dynamite he could not have been more surprised.

"I say," he exclaimed. "I'm most awfully sorry. I must have caught my arm on the handle. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"What's the good of being sorry?" stormed the charwoman. She went down on her knees and wrung her hands. "Everything's spoilt."

"Oh no, it isn't." In his kindly, impetuous way he flung himself down on to the floor beside her. "Look here"—he held the chicken out to her—"it's not spoilt at all."

"It *is* spoilt, I tell you." She snatched the chicken from him and regarded it with passionately miserable eyes. "Everything is spoilt. The fowl, the bread, the cream and the tart. 'E's that fiddy faddy, 'e won't touch a thing." She grovelled to the right of her and held up the smashed

bottle of Heidsieck. "Even *that's* smashed, and it'd 'ave done 'im such a lot of good." She collapsed on to the debris, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"No kly, lovey-dovey, no kly." The Chinaman left his starch, and bent over his sobbing wife. "It's allee lightee."

"It's *not* all right. It's all wrong." She caught hold of the Chinaman's hand and kissed it over and over again, with a passion wonderful to behold. "Ah, won't you eat it, if I take off the outside bits?"

"No can, lovey-dovey, no can."

"There, what did I tell you!" The charwoman turned on Dixon, beside herself with rage. "You see for yourself, everything's spoilt."

It was not often in his life that Dixon found himself at fault, but now he was so angry with himself he was at a loss what to say. He got to his feet, and stood looking miserably first at the sobbing woman, and then at the Chinaman. "I can't tell you how sorry I am. It was horribly careless of me."

"You did it a-purpose. Yer pushed the basket. I saw yer."

He was struck dumb. At the best of times he was a bad liar, but in the face of such plain truth he could not even snatch at a subterfuge.

"If I did, it doesn't make me any the less sorry." He put his hand in his pocket. "Of course you must let me make the loss of your supper good." He took a sovereign out of the coins in his hand and held it out to the Chinaman. "Catch on to this, John, and buy yourself another fowl."

The Chinaman's face went livid with rage. He sprang forward and struck at Dixon's hand with the fury of a tiger cat, a flow of Chinese invective pouring from his mouth like a stream.

Dixon did not understand Chinese, but he had only to look at the man to understand what he was saying. There was murder in his eyes.

"Don't, John, don't!" The woman got up and rushed between the two men, throwing her arms round her husband. "'E ain't worth thinking abart! If you go on like that you'll have one of your megriems! Don't you worry your 'ead! Lovey-dovey'll get you your supper again. There, there! There, there!" She spoke like a mother soothing her sick child.

But this time the Chinaman's rage was not to be assuaged so easily. Screaming at the top of his voice in his shrill, high falsetto, he thrust the woman away from him and came at Mortimer Dixon again. "I killee, killee, killee you!" he screamed, leaping across the intervening floor. His face drew into a horrible convulsion, he threw up his hands and, with a dreadful, gasping noise, dropped like a stone at Mortimer Dixon's feet.

"Good God, what's wrong?" Dixon bent to raise the frail figure, but the woman was before him, and pushed him violently away.

"Don't you dare lay 'and 'on 'im," she cried. "'E's all right; you leave 'im to me. It's only one of his megrims. I know what to do."

"I'd better run for a doctor."

"I'll thank you to mind your own business. You leave 'im and me alone. We don't want no doctors here."

"But I can't leave you alone like this. That husband of yours is a very sick man." In his heart of hearts Dixon thought that he was dead.

"No, he ain't. I know what I'm a-doin' of. I've seen 'im like this before." She lifted the inanimate figure into her arms, and rocked it to and fro, the tears pouring down her fat red face. "There, there, there! Lovey-dovey's got you. Don't you be afraid. Lovey-dovey's here!"

To many European eyes doubtless it would have been a disgusting and distressing sight to see an Englishwoman thus tenderly expending herself on a Chinaman. But Dixon did not see eye to eye with ordinary people in these things. To him a woman was a woman and a man was a man, no matter to what race they belonged. His tender heart was torn with sympathy as he looked at the pair in that wretched cellar, and thought how meaningless the little pettinesses of class distinction and race become in the presence of the two great elemental forces of the world, Love and Death.

The woman pushed open her man's white cotton garment, and laid her ear to his breast. "I can't 'ear 'is 'eart beatin'!" She looked up at Mortimer with terror in her eyes.

"You'd better let me fetch a doctor," Dixon said earnestly. "It may save his life."

But she shook her head. "Nothing can save his life,

mister. It is only a question of time. It's that stuff that's killin' 'im !”

“ Opium ? ”

She nodded again. “ That's right. He's always at it the minute my back's turned, try as I may. It's 'is only fault, mister. 'E's no more gone off with that girl that all the papers are full of than you.”

“ I know that,” said Mortimer Dixon.

It was true. He could not have told why he knew it. But he did.

At his words the woman's face changed. “ Look 'ere,” she said passionately. “ I can't leave 'im alone. Will you promise to stay by 'im, and I'll run round to get a man I know to see what 'e can do.”

“ You mean a doctor ? ”

“ Yes, 'e's a doctor right enough, but one of 'is own kind. An English doctor wouldn't be of any use, bless yer. But this man, 'e'll know what to do. I 'ave 'ad 'im once before when he was took bad and he made 'im quite well. Will yer stay ? ”

“ I'll stay.”

The woman snatched her bonnet from the floor and vanished into the dark.

CHAPTER IV

So it came to pass that in another minute Mortimer Dixon was kneeling on the damp floor of the Whitechapel cellar holding the man, whom he had been chasing all day in the hope of bringing a scoundrel to justice, most tenderly in his arms. It seemed incredible, but Dixon knew too much of life and its mysteries to wonder at anything. He had the rare faculty of accepting things as he found them. So he knelt there holding the dying man in his arms as simply as a child.

And, as he held him, his keen eyes noticed every blemish, and every characteristic of the man's face. The low forehead, the fine eyebrows, the well-kept, glossy, silky, black hair. The delicate ears, the fine nostrils, the exquisite texture of the skin ; the pallor of the finely cut lips. Pushing aside the cotton garment, he bent down to listen to his heart. At once he detected a faintly fluctuating throbbing.

Whatever his condition might be, the man was not dead. Relieved of the instant anxiety, his eyes went mechanically to the Chinaman's shirt. It was of silk, so rich, so fine, that it did not need a connoisseur in Chinese fabrics to know that only the rich could afford to wear such textures as these.

At that instant a shudder like a convulsion passed through the man's motionless form. He moved restlessly, and his dark eyes opened and stared up into Dixon's face. For a moment the two men looked into each other's eyes as they had looked half-an-hour before, when the Englishman, bending down over the yawning mouth of the cellar, first caught sight of the oblique gaze of the Chinaman staring up at him out of the darkness below. Unable to stand the tension of that agonising silence any longer, Dixon spoke and broke the spell. "You're feeling better?"

The dark eyes blinked.

"Is there anything I can get for you? Whatever it is, tell me, and I'll do it gladly."

The Chinaman said nothing, but he smiled. It was a wonderful smile, subtle and gracious, transforming the whole of his waxen face. It revealed the charm of the man, fascinating the young journalist with its sweetness in the most extraordinary way. "I wish to goodness I knew what was wrong with you," he cried.

"It's my heart," the Chinaman said suddenly in purest English. Then he opened his eyes and smiled into the concerned face bending over him. "Thank God, I shall soon die."

So attuned was Dixon's imagination to the romantic conditions in which he found himself, that the climax of hearing his native tongue spoken in that high-pitched voice, without the slightest tinge of accent, passed unheeded by. It seemed to him quite natural that this man, posing as a laundryman, should be nothing of the kind. Indeed, for that matter, from the first moment he had set eyes on him, Dixon's *flair* for racial characteristics had told him at once that this was no common man.

"You're not going to die, bless you!" he said, and his cheery young voice rang through the cellar in the most fantastic way. "If you'll only leave off eating that beastly opium there's no reason why you shouldn't live."

"The gods forbid."

"Why, don't you want to live?"

The strange black eyes, inscrutable and full of strange shadows, dwelt on the young Englishman's bright face. He was about to reply when, again, his face was convulsed, and a spasm of pain seemed to run through him. He shook like a leaf in the wind.

"You're worse." Dixon bent over him.

"I'm dying."

"Don't say that. Try to tell me if there is nothing I can do."

The pallid lips moved, but no sound came. Dixon bent lower, until his ear almost touched the Chinaman's mouth.

"I can't hear what you say. Try to tell me again."

Again the lips quivered, and the words fluttered up to Dixon's brain.

"Carry me into the next room."

"The next room?" Dixon looked round. "You mean the cellar I came through?"

With a superhuman effort the dying man lifted his hand and pointed in the opposite direction, and Dixon's alert gaze, following it, saw that, shrouded in the darkness, there was another black velvet curtain let into the wall.

Too concerned at the moment even to blame himself for not having seen it before, he lifted the Chinaman up in his strong young arms, and carrying him across the cellar pushed aside the curtain, and stood within the inner room.

If Dixon had been surprised to find a Whitechapel underground cellar installed as a modern up-to-date laundry, what was his surprise when he saw the contents of that inner room!

The inner cellar was, if anything, larger than the other two. The walls were hung with black velvet. The floor was covered with white sand. In the centre of the room, on gilt trestles, stood a large oblong object, shrouded with a finely embroidered white sheet. Suspended immediately above it swung an oil lamp, which swayed to and fro gently, as if impelled to motion by the perfectly equipoised balance of its own weight.

Dixon did not know what he had expected to see. One thing, however, was certain. He had not expected this.

It was so white, so silent, so apart from all the ordinary things of life, that he hesitated on the threshold, much as a Mohammedan might hesitate to step in his ordinary boots on to holy ground. His quick wit and alert imagination

informed him instantly that the shrouded object was a coffin. He had heard too much of the Chinaman's passion for assuring himself the presence of his own sarcophagus, that he might be shipped back according to the tenets of his own faith if he should die in a strange land, to be surprised at that. What he did not grasp was what the dying man lying in his arms wished him to do.

"What is it you want me to do?" he said softly, bending down and looking into the Chinaman's face.

"Take off the sheet." The words faint but clear floated up from the white lips.

Without an instant's hesitation he did as he was asked. Holding the man in his left arm, he rested his burden tenderly against the trestles, and with his right hand noiselessly withdrew the richly embroidered sheet. It said much for his self-control that, when he saw the kind of coffin revealed, he did not utter one word of surprise.

It was a glorious thing, that coffin. Scarlet and gold, with painted medallions let in round the sides, each one set with a bordering of jewels, the price of which, if they were real, might in the old days have been the ransom of a king.

"Lay my hand on the coffin." It was not a request but a command.

Dixon obeyed. He took the delicate hand in his—how delicate it was he had not realised until it lay within his own—and, holding it gently by the wrist, placed it on the gorgeously lacquered coffin lid.

"Now put me down."

Dixon gently withdrew his sustaining arm, and the Chinaman, with an effort that made the pearls of sweat roll down his face like tears, tried to pull himself upright. For a moment he swayed and his eyes closed. Dixon expected every moment to see him fall. Then, like the last flash of an expiring candle, his strength seemed to flicker up again. He opened his dark eyes, and his sweet, sad smile irradiated his strange, inscrutable face. "You fools, you poor Englishmen," he said slowly, "who strive and curse and kill each other for the little things of life. This is the only life! This is the only ambition!" He stooped over the coffin. "This is the end of all men, to lie serene and at rest, absorbed into Nirvana, to lie for ever on the bosom of the gods."

He ceased, and without a sound fell forward into Dixon's outstretched arms.

He had barely lowered him to the ground when the char-woman burst in. "Where is he? What 'ave you done with 'im? What are *you* doing in 'ere?"

"I think he's dead."

With a piercing cry that went echoing through those vaulted spaces until it seemed as if it would never die away, the woman threw herself beside the dead man, frantically calling on her companion to intervene and save his life.

The man, a tall Chinaman with a venerable head and spectacles hiding his shining eyes, knelt down reverently and thrust his hands into the dead man's breast. Then he lifted the fallen eyelids, peering into the dark mystery of the staring eyes again, and shook his head.

"Is he dead?" asked Dixon quietly.

The Chinaman nodded his head. "Him gone top side below." He turned his thumbs upwards, then downwards, with a gesture that seemed to Dixon to hold the whole epitome of the history of man. Then folding his arms across his breast, he began swinging to and fro, reciting in a monotonous undertone a stream of endless words, which Dixon took to be, and rightly, a prayer for the dead.

For a moment he looked at the Asiatics, the dead man and the living man, then he turned to the woman of his own race. "Look here," he said quietly, touching her on the shoulder, "if I can do anything for you I shall be glad to. This is no place for you. Put on your bonnet and come with me."

The woman said nothing, but continued to stare into the dead face of the man she had loved, calling on him in frantic tones to come back and speak to her again.

Again Dixon spoke to her and entreated her to come away. "If there is anywhere you would like his body to be taken to, I'll gladly help."

At that she stopped her lamenting and turned. The tragedy of sorrow set her about. "He and me'll stay 'ere."

"But you can't stay down here with a dead man alone in a cellar."

"Why can't I? It's our 'ome."

Dixon was silent. In the face of great sorrow, speech seems out of place. He turned to the Chinaman still reciting his prayers. "I hope you will do all that you can for this poor woman," he said quietly. "She was the dead man's wife."

The Chinaman ceased his intoning. He peered up at the young Englishman through his glasses: Dixon told himself, with a kind of horror, that so mocking a smile and so cunning a glance were an insult to the majesty of the dead.

"Me do evellyting, Mister esquire." He spread out his flat hands, inclining towards Dixon, and went back to his monotonous sing-song.

For the last time Dixon returned to the charwoman. "I wish you'd come away with me, but if you won't, you won't. Of course you know your own business best. You know you'll have to inform an English doctor of course. Are you sure there's nothing I can do for you?"

The woman turned and looked at him. Dixon, viewing her face by the light of the lamp swinging to and fro solemnly above the gorgeous coffin, told himself that his imagination was overwrought, for it seemed to him that the same mocking look as there was in the supposed doctor's played over her rubicund countenance, and there was the same cunning obliqueness in her eyes. Still he held on to what he conceived to be his duty. "Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked her earnestly.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You can leave me alone with my dead." The simple old phrase invested the figure of the kneeling woman with a strange, new dignity. It was not an appeal. It was a command. Dixon obeyed it. Without another word he turned on his heel and went into the next room.

Knowing full well that he should never see its like again, he stood and took it all in for the last time: the flickering fire, the shining irons, the delicate blouses; the blue china bowl with the yellow starch in which a few minutes before he had seen the dead man's hand; the spotless clothes; the kettles hissing merrily on the copper fire. Strewn on the floor, the chicken, the French roll, the strawberry tartlet and the broken bottle of wine.

He looked over his shoulder through the curtained doorway at the gorgeous sarcophagus flaring in scarlet and gold under the shifting light. The Chinaman bowing and reciting on the one side, and the Englishwoman rocking to and fro on the other, and the dead man lying in between. He took it all in. Then he turned to go. On the floor at his feet,

its dazzling gold face shining up at him, lay his sovereign, which the dead man had struck out of his hand.

"She'll find it useful when it comes to the paying of funeral expenses," he told himself. He left it lying there, and lifting the black velvet curtain, he let it fall behind him, shutting out that strange picture of exotic underworld life, and passing out through the cellar he went up the worn stone steps, and in a few minutes emerged from the darkness of death and mystery into the fresh air.

For a few seconds Dixon stood there hesitating. He was very tired. He was very hungry. He was a little overwhelmed by what he had gone through and somewhat shaken by what had occurred. No man—at least no young man with Dixon's sensibilities—can stand by and see a fellow-creature die, pass through that fearful ordeal which one day sooner or later he himself will be called upon to endure, without being affected by the sight. Above and beyond all, he was just beginning to feel the strain of his long day's work, and this unexpected climax, putting an end, as it did, to all his hopes, made him so heart-sick and depressed that for two pins he could have cried like a girl.

Obviously there was only one thing for him to do, and that was to get home as quickly as he could. He had done his utmost, and no one could deny he had run a queer quarry to earth. Not that he thought for one moment that the man who had just died in his arms was the man who had abducted the girl, but, undoubtedly, he had struck one of those strange underworld romances so fascinating to some mentalities, and so particularly attractive to Mortimer Dixon himself.

He had set himself out to find an upper-class Chinaman who had married an Englishwoman, and who ran a laundry of his own. Well, he had found one. But whether he had got hold of the right trail, which would ultimately lead him to his appointed end, time alone could tell.

For the moment there was nothing more for him to do. Exacting as he was to himself where his work was concerned, he saw at once the uselessness of staying any longer from his well-earned meal and his bed.

The man, whoever he was and whatever he had done, was dead. Therefore, nothing more could be learned from him.

There was only one thing which still presented itself to

him as remaining to be done. He would find an English doctor, and send him to the cellar before he went home.

He left the court, went out into the busy street and inquired for a chemist's shop. It did not take his long legs more than five minutes to find the man who, in his turn, recommended a doctor quite near at hand.

By a stroke of good fortune—the first that day, as Dixon told himself irritably—the doctor was in.

He was a pleasant, decent sort of a man who had grown old in the service of the poor. When he heard what Dixon wanted him to do he simply laughed.

“My dear chap, if I ran about giving death certificates to every alien who dies in the East End of London, I should have my work cut out.”

“I'm prepared to pay you for that death certificate, or for anything else you may do.”

The busy man looked queerly at the young man. “I take it you're not a relative of the deceased?”

“I never set eyes on the man before to-day. I'm a journalist. Certain work that I had to do for my paper was concerned with this Chinaman and his wife. That's how I happened to be there.”

The doctor interrupted him. “The missing-girl business, I take it?”

Dixon was annoyed beyond all speech at the direct question, but there was no way out of it. He contented himself with one word: “Yes.”

“Bless your heart,” said the doctor, “you might as well look for a needle in a bottle of hay. This kind of thing happens every day.”

“English girls are hardly abducted in broad daylight in London every day,” returned Dixon coldly.

“Aren't they?” The doctor laughed again. “You live in Whitechapel as I do, and you'll hear of this kind of thing going on all the time. Bless your heart, the police know all about it; but they shut their eyes to it. It's only now and again they pick out a case as they've done this time, just to make a good story, or unless”—the corners of his mouth went down and he winked at Dixon—“unless there's something else behind it. They don't care a tuppenny dam about the girl.”

“Then the sooner they learn to, the better,” said Dixon hotly. “You may believe that Englishwomen can be stolen

from their homes and their people with impunity in London, but *I don't!*”

“The girls aren't *stolen*, bless your heart!” cried the doctor. “They go of their own free will. It's a nasty business, but everyone who lives down the East End knows it goes on, so what is the good of talking? You can't stop it, so you may just as well shut your eyes to it. If you can't shut your eyes, the next best thing is to shut your mouth.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you know of such cases in your own experience, doctor?”

“Bless your heart, dozens of 'em. The girls are as mad after the Chinks as the Chinks are mad after them.”

“What's the attraction?”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. “Too few men. Too many old maids. Human nature, my dear sir; human nature. A woman wants a child and a husband. If she can't get one of her own kind she will take the next best.” He nodded his bushy head at the horrified Dixon. “And, damn it all, why blame 'em! *I don't*. If I were a girl and got hold of a decent husband—and mark you, some of these Chinks *are* decent—making good money and fond of me, bless your heart, I would jump at the chance.”

“Well, to me it seems horrible,” said Dixon slowly.

The doctor laughed again. “So it did to me when I first started, but I soon got used to it, and if you lived down this way, so would you. If you can't have what you want, it is just as well to want what you can have. However, I can't stand here talking all day about pigtailed policemen. Just give me the address of this man of yours, and I will give him a look in some time to-night.”

Dixon took out a sovereign and put it down on the table. “I shall be very deeply obliged to you, if you will.”

The doctor put out his great hand and pushed the sovereign back again. “Bless your heart, I'm not a Harley Street specialist. Half-a-crown and chance it, that's my price, and thank God when it's paid in cash.” He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a handful of loose silver. “There's your seventeen-and-sixpence, and you take my tip: next time you want to get anything out of a White-chapel doctor don't go offering him sovereigns or he might misunderstand you.”

Dixon's eyes dilated. “Misunderstand me? Do you

mean he might think I was trying to bribe him to do something he oughtn't to do?"

The doctor picked up his bag and began ramming bottles and instruments into it as fast as he could. "What else do you suppose I mean?" His hearty laughter rang out again. "There you go again, looking as if you thought I was pulling your leg. Why, my dear chap, there is not a day of my life that somebody doesn't come into this surgery of mine and offer to pay me money to do something I ought not to do. I could have been a rich man by now if I had chosen to listen to 'em; but, bless your heart, what is the good of money if you have to shove your hands into the mud to pick it up? Not that I blame those who do, mark you. It's not their fault. Anyway, it's none of my business. God Almighty knew what He was doing when He made men and women what He has made 'em. Bless your heart, I would do like the others do if I could, but I can't. He made me one of the honest ones, worse luck!"

Dixon felt himself strangely drawn to this queer White-chapel philosopher. "What kind of things do they come and ask you to do?"

"Help 'em to get husbands when they haven't got 'em; help 'em to get rid of 'em when they have. Ask me to get rid of their children when the Almighty wants 'em to have 'em, and hold me accountable when He don't. Ask me to bring people back from the grave when they're dead; and bother my life out to give 'em a death certificate when they aren't."

Dixon laughed outright. "I want a death certificate too, please."

The doctor shot another of his queer side glances into the tired young face. "You haven't insured poor old Chinky, have you? What's the good of it to you?"

Dixon drew out his card-case. "That is the name of the paper I work for. That is my private address. I'm one of the honest ones too, worse luck! I don't like taking money for nothing. I like to have something, even if it's only a death certificate, to show for my day's work."

The doctor shunted the bundle of red flannel he was holding under his arm, and scrutinised the card. "Right. If I find it's O.K. I'll send you a line to say Chinky's gone to heaven." He dropped the card into his capacious waistcoat pocket and shrugged his shoulders. "I sha'n't be sorry

to get there either. If it's anything like this world it must be a mighty amusing place."

"How much do I owe you for the death certificate?" Dixon asked him.

"You haven't got it yet. Still, it'll save your spending a penny on the order if you pay me now, and if he isn't dead I'll send it back." He held out his hand. "Five bob. Not much when you come to think of it, is it? I've no doubt it'll set some poor soul's heart at rest."

As if he saw a curtain lifted from a picture, Dixon beheld in his mind's eye that vision of bizarre anguish, the dead Chinaman and the woman rocking to and fro on the floor. "Not his wife's, anyway."

The doctor shut his overflowing bag with a snap. "Then somebody else's. Never a soul goes to Kingdom Come but that somebody is glad to think of it. A man is lucky if there is one woman to cry over him. Wish I knew of one to cry over my dead body—but there, bless your heart"—he shrugged his great shoulders again—"you never know your luck." He lifted his huge bag off the table as if it were a feather. "Well, I must be off. Five more little angels 'trailing clouds of glory' via the public-house and the gutter, expect me to help them down from heaven into Whitechapel to-night. I've kept your card, and I'll send you your certificate. Good-bye." He held out his great hand.

Dixon grasped it with a cordiality he rarely felt for a stranger. "Good-bye, and thank you. I hope we shall meet again."

"Hope we may, but don't expect we shall. Still, if you have nothing better to do one of these fine days, you come down and spend a month in Whitechapel. You would enjoy yourself if I know anything about looks."

"You're right," said Dixon, laughing. "It's just what I should like."

"If you do, remember to look me up. There's a chair that calls itself a bed, always at the disposal of a friend."

"I'll remember. That's sure."

The massive face softened into a tenderness that was almost like a woman's look. "Nothing's sure, my dear chap. Well, if I'm alive I'll be here. If I'm gone, it's because I'll be dead." He shrugged his shoulders. "Either way, good-night and good luck."

"Good-night and good luck to you," echoed Dixon.

They went together out of the surgery, and parted with a nod at the end of the street.

Mortimer Dixon stood on the curbstone of the Commercial Road, and he felt about as sick as any self-respecting journalist in Fleet Street might want to feel.

He wanted to rush off to the office and ask the chief to discharge him. He wanted to rush off to the club and tell the assembled multitudes of his fellow-writers that such an ass as he was ought to be kicked out. He wanted to rush to the river and fling himself in off a bridge where there was a nice, sharp current and no policeman with life-saving apparatus about. Most of all he wanted to go into the little parlour at Brixton and fling himself full length on the hearth-rug, hide his face in the lap of the little girl who loved him so dearly and sob his great, boyish, overflowing heart out.

As he stood there debating which of these sensible courses to follow, a taxicab, spruce and gay, with very clean windows and very bright brass, came bowling along the Commercial Road. The brightness of the brass caught his order-loving eye, and he dashed off the curbstone and flung himself headlong in front of it, and stood there like a lunatic waving his arms, holding the traffic up.

"Where are you going?" he yelled, entirely regardless of the commotion he had caused.

"To Kingdom Come," replied the chauffeur, with pointed rudeness, "if there are many more idiots like you!"

"If you are going to the Kingdom of Heaven," Dixon remarked affably, "I'll get into your taxi. That's just the place I want."

"I'll have a look at my fare first, thanks," said the chauffeur, eyeing him unkindly.

Mortimer Dixon, who had drawn his salary the night before, in advance as usual, and, also as usual, carried the whole lot of it in his pockets, shoved his hands into his trousers, and held them out full of silver and gold.

"How's that for the strait and narrow gate?" he inquired genially.

"Not forgetting the tip to St Peter," remarked the chauffeur, who had not only a sense of humour, but was also by way of being a bit of a wit himself. "Get in if you want to. London's waiting."

"If you've got a paper handy, you might let me have it," said Dixon, "otherwise I might spoil your nice clean seat."

The chauffeur solemnly dived beneath the seat and extracted a newspaper and handed it to him. "What's your address?"

"Bedlam via Duke Street, Adelphi."

"Right-o," replied the chauffeur. "Shove yourself in."

Mortimer Dixon opened the door and shoved himself in.

The chauffeur, beholding him over his shoulder solemnly spreading out the newspaper on the seat, cackled to himself joyously. "He ain't a drunk and 'e ain't balmy! Gawd! I wonder who 'e is." He clicked the little flag and the taxi moved off.

It was fresh from the garage: the machine was in excellent condition, the man drove excellently well.

Dixon, fuming with excitement and mad for food and a bath, was so lost in thought that he positively jumped with amazement to find himself whirling over the river, along the Embankment, and up the little street in which he lived.

"I wish I were a millionaire," he said, as he paid the driver; "I'd engage you, St Peter, for my chauffeur."

"Would you now, really!" returned that worthy. "Why?"

"I like a chap that goes quick, shaves corners, and takes chances. I'm by way of taking chances myself. What's your stand?"

"Northumberland Avenue."

"And your number?"

"Thirteen."

"Number thirteen, eh? I'll remember *you*." He put back the half-crown he'd selected and picked out a half-sovereign instead.

"What's this for?" the man asked him.

"For you. Number thirteen's my lucky number. I'm a superstitious ass. Keep it for luck."

"Wish there were more superstitious asses about," said the chauffeur happily. "Don't you worry about your luck. It's written all over you. You'll get there all right."

"Ay," said Dixon, and his gay young voice changed so subtly that the man, observing him, stared at him amazed. "I'll get there, but I don't want to wait till I have both feet in the grave before I do it. I'm mad to get there *now*."

"I jolly well 'opes you will." As with the flower girl, the waitress and the fat, old greengrocer, those few words,

exchanged on the curbstone of a London pavement, had made Mortimer Dixon another friend.

"That's good of you. Thanks." Not even hunger, thirst, spoiled suit, or the discouragement of utter failure at the end of a long day's wasted work could rob the sunny smile of its charm. "Good-night."

"'Ere, I say, mister," the chauffeur called out after him, "the newspaper's stickin' to you!"

Dixon went into fits of laughter. "I'm wrapped round with the thought and the intelligence of the English nation! Even if it's one of my own articles hiding my shameful trousers, at least it's better than dirt." His boyish laughter came ringing down the street as he vanished into the adjacent doorway, and it stayed with the taxicab-driver, through all the vicissitudes of his calling, for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER V

UP the stairs went Mortimer Dixon, three steps at a time, until he got to the top and let himself into his own little flat.

A pile of letters and two telegrams lay on the mat as he entered, but he did not even trouble to stoop to pick them up. He rushed into the sitting-room, switched on the light, and rushed to the telephone.

"If you have ever been in love and kept your young man waiting through no fault of your own, and wanted to implore his forgiveness without losing an instant, for the sake of that love give me 9031 Brixton, *quick*."

"Whoever are you gettin' at?" said a female voice through the telephone.

"At 9031 Brixton, my angel," responded Dixon fervently. "Oh, think of your own young man and your own shortcomings, and be kind!"

A subdued giggle was wafted to him over the wires, and a murmuring of female voices, but hardly a second elapsed before another sound greeted him, and the soft tone of the girl he loved was heard asking who was there.

"It's *me*," said Dixon, in an agony of contrition. "Dearest and best of beloved darlings, I've just this instant got back. I've had nothing to eat. I've had nothing to

drink. I've spoiled my new suit. I've lost my new gloves, and I'm too black for a self-respecting Hottentot to touch. I've been in a cellar and interviewed a coffin. I've promised to dance at a Whitechapel flower girl's wedding and give her a long pale pink feather that lies down, and I've found out nothing except three things that I've known all my life—that I adore you, that you oughtn't to marry me, and that of all the asses in the United Kingdom of journalists, I'm the biggest!"

"Oh, Morty darling, sha'n't I come over and get you your supper? I could cook it whilst you're having a bath."

"Angel," cried the lover, so fervently that the telephone receiver almost cracked with emotion. "Let you come out at this time of night! Not if it were to hear my death-bed confession! I could kill myself when I think of you kicking your darling little heels under that beast of an old clock at Victoria Station. Now be a good child and listen to me. I'm going to take ten baths. Then I'm going to Gatti's, and I'm going to eat ten chops, twelve strawberry ices and an entire Camembert cheese. Then I'm going to bed with your picture under my pillow, and at ten o'clock to-morrow morning I'm going to call upon you in a taxi, and we'll go and buy up the whole of Tottenham Court Road."

"Oh, Morty," came the soft little voice through the transmitter, "don't eat too fast, and be sure you don't take your bath too hot."

"Hot!" he screamed. "My sweet child, I'm going to take it boiling. Wait a jiffy! I'll leave all the doors open and turn on the water so that you can hear it running and pretend you're here."

He dashed into the little bathroom and turned both taps on to the full. Then he dashed back again to the telephone. "Can you hear it?"

Over the wires came a soft confusion of sounds. "Chops and darlings and water taps and God bless you," interspersed with sweet, helpless laughter. Then Fate intervened, and Mortimer Dixon was cut off.

"God bless the man that invented telephones." He caught up the photograph in the gold frame that stood in the place of honour on his mantelpiece, and kissed it joyfully. "My wonderful little woman," he whispered tenderly, "never a word of blame! Never a thought of self! I'm not fit to

kiss your pretty brown boots as they pick their clean, sweet way along the dirty old pavement, but if you'll only stick to me and go on loving me, some of these fine days I'll make myself into the man you believe me to be, so help me God, I will." He kissed the picture again in a rush of emotion that held in it as much reverence as there was passion. Then he put it back in its place on the mantelpiece, took a sniff at the pink roses that flanked it on either side, and, carolling the last music hall ditty at the top of his high young tenor, banged into his little bedroom to prepare for his bath.

"Dirty beast," he apostrophised his new grey suit as it lay on the floor. In his mind's eye arose a picture of himself bumping down the stone steps to the cellar, and he picked up the offending garments with the tongs and held them at arm's-length, shouting with laughter. "My poor children," he said solemnly, "don't dream of aspiring to the chaste sanctuary of the linen basket in your present condition. There's only one place for you——" He gingerly opened the lid of the coal-bin and dropped in the offending garments. "Beg pardon, coals!" he cried, as he banged the lid down.

If any one of the solemn old editors who welcomed him so rapturously could have seen him skipping about in his shirt-tails, in search of a scrubbing-brush and a pot of ammonia, possibly they might have changed their estimate of the rising young journalist.

Into the boiling water went a sixpenny packet of lux and a bottle of cloudy ammonia. In went a scrubbing-brush. In went Mortimer Dixon.

"'Ear that water runnin' away?" said the hall porter's wife to the hall porter. "That's three baths in fifteen minutes. You'd better make the furnace up."

"Damn the furnace," said the hall porter irritably, who was comfortably reading his favourite newspaper. "Who's 'avin' three baths?"

"Mr Dixon, of course. He's bath mad, 'e is," said the hall porter's wife to her husband. "As for 'is washin'! Fourteen-and-sevenpence-'a'penny 'is washin' bill last Monday as I'm a Christian. Sinful, I call it; but there's no doubt about it, he do look nice."

He certainly did look nice, as, half-an-hour later, with his silk crush hat at just the right angle, a rose in his button-

hole, and his light coat over his arm, he came tearing down the stairs in his immaculate evening clothes.

"Party again, sir?" inquired the hall porter, who was just about to lock up.

"Party be blowed," said Dixon gaily. "I'm going across the way to lunch."

"To *lunch*, sir." The honest fellow's eyes nearly goggled themselves out of his respectable head.

"A whale, an ox, and a few sheep as an entree. Whistle me two taxis. My appetite's too big to go in one."

"Drunk as a lord," thought the hall porter, whistling valiantly. "How he manage to keep 'is words so plain and 'is legs so steady, passes me." He stopped blowing and turned to Dixon. "There's a lady been to see you, sir."

"What name?"

"Wouldn't leave no name, sir."

"Any message?"

"No, sir."

"Young?"

"So-so, sir."

"Pretty?"

"An 'as-bin."

The taxis drew up at the door.

"Lady said she'd call again, sir."

"Good." He drew half-a-crown out of his pocket. "I say, I can't choose between these two delightful taxis. It might hurt the feelings of the one I didn't take. Pay 'em and keep the change. I'll walk."

"Said he was going out to lunch. Ordered two taxis to take him to Gatti's and then paid 'em both and walked," the hall porter told his wife afterwards. "Mad as a 'atter."

"If you was as mad," returned his wife sharply, "I'd not 'ave to work."

"Steak or chop, sir?" said the head waiter, hurrying forward, beaming all over when he saw Dixon.

"Chop my boots," cried that ravenous young journalist. "I'm as empty as a country church with a poor parson. Bring me the joint."

He smacked his hat on to a peg and, the place being crowded, dropped into a seat at the nearest table, where a young man with the remnants of a magnificent dessert before him was reading *The Evening News*.

"Hullo!" The man dropped his newspaper, and stared at Dixon. "So you've come, have you? You're a nice man to ask out to dinner, I *don't* think."

"Dinner," said Dixon. "Man alive, I haven't seen food all day! This is my lunch."

"Then you didn't get my wire?"

"I got nothing," said Dixon grimly, "except a dirty suit and a ha'penny bun."

"You look pretty fit on the diet," said his friend. "I cursed you nicely, I can tell you, when you didn't turn up. I had two seats for the Empire, and I had fixed up as nice a little meal at my place as any man could want. Confound you, I remembered all your favourites. Cold roast fowl, salad, strawberry tart, clotted cream and a bottle of fizz."

"*What!*"

"What's up?" said his friend concernedly. Dixon's face had gone quite white. "You're sick with hunger, man. What a fool you are to go so long."

"It's not hunger I'm sick with. Don't you worry about me, there's a good chap, I'm as right as a trivet. Just repeat me that dinner of yours over again."

Reginald Carew stared at Dixon as if he thought that he had gone mad. "Whatever for?"

"Tell it me all over again. Quick. Word for word. What was it you said you had got?"

"Roast chicken, lettuce salad, strawberry tart, clotted cream and a bottle of fizz."

"What was the strawberry tart like?"

"I say, what's the matter with you, old chap?"

"Was it one of those round things turned up at the edges, with a kind of red jelly stuff, and the strawberries stuck in?"

The man on the other side of the table nodded. "Yes. Why? What on earth's up?"

"I am," said Mortimer Dixon savagely. He jumped to his feet, caught up his coat, and took up his hat. "I don't want beef," he cried to the head waiter approaching him. He dashed half-a-crown on to the table. "Eat it yourself. Come on," he said to his petrified companion. "Paid your bill?"

"I didn't, but the chap I dined with did."

Dixon stamped with fury. "Then what the deuce are you waiting for? Come on."

"Come on, where?"

"To your flat, of course."

The blank dismay on Carew's rosy countenance drove Dixon nearly mad. "What on earth do you want to go to my flat for?"

"To eat that supper, of course."

"But, my dear chap, you can get supper here, can't you?"

"No, I can't," returned Dixon savagely. "Buck up and get your hat."

"I'll stand you a bottle of fizz, if that's what you're after."

"Fizz my foot," cried Dixon furiously. His blue eyes dilated until they were almost black with excitement. "I want that fowl, that clotted cream, and that strawberry tart."

"Then you can't have 'em," returned the other man shortly. He thought there was nobody in the world like Mortimer, but no one likes to see their saints come off their pedestals, and, not to put too fine a point on the matter, Reginald Carew, who had a perfect horror of anything approaching drunkenness, thought in his secret heart—and felt pretty sick in the thinking—that his friend was a bit "on."

"Why can't I?"

"Because they're not there to see."

"Not there!" Dixon's eyes blazed across the table. "Where are they?"

"All right, old boy. Keep your hair on," returned the other soothingly. "There's no need to shout. You're attracting attention."

Dixon's laugh rang out hard and shrill, less like a laugh than a cry. "I'll attract their attention more before I have done with 'em. What have you done with the things?"

Reginald Carew bit his lips, and his manner became still more distant. "When you didn't turn up, I accepted an invitation to dinner with Nat Bingham, and as it was no good letting things go bad, and I knew I couldn't use 'em, I gave the whole basket, just as it came up from Benoist, to my char."

"*Your char!*" As if the word had wrought a miracle, the instant it was spoken Dixon regained his self-control.

Now it has been said, and truly, that Dixon's greatest gift was his gift for making friends wherever he went, but his greatest quality is not so easily defined. It was

a power at once subtle and incomprehensible which, at the very moment when he was strung up to the highest pitch of mental excitement, suddenly descended upon him, leaving him absolutely self-controlled and cool. Then it was that he was at his deadliest. Then it was he was to be really feared. He was like a runner running a race who, at the very instant when the onlookers expect to see him drop out, or make a tremendous final effort for the finish, suddenly ceases to run, and begins to walk.

So that night, in the crowded restaurant, to the clatter of glass and china, this invisible, all-powerful influence descended on Mortimer Dixon. The colour came back to his face. The fire died out of his eyes. The warmth came back to his hands. The smile came back to his lips. Where he had been hot and passionate, he was cool and self-controlled. Where he had been uncertain, he was certain. Where he had been puzzled, he was clear. Where he had been tired out, he was as rested as if he had slept for hours. He was no longer impatient, or irritable, or mad to be doing something. He was no longer the young journalist striving, and shoving, and pushing, to get a bit of news, or bring off a good chase. He was a man, quiet and self-reliant, who had done his day's work and was satisfied with it. He was a man who could afford to wait, for he was a man who knew he was right.

This which takes so long a time in telling, took less than a moment in the doing. So instantaneous was the transformation that it passed unnoticed save by the head waiter who, beef in hand, still stood by anxiously eyeing his favourite customer, and by Reginald Carew, who saw the change, though he did not understand it, and thanked his God, like the good fellow he was, that his "old saint Morty" had *not* tumbled off his pedestal; that whatever else he might be—mad, irresponsible, or as sometimes dawned on Carew in a queer kind of way, a chap that might some day be acknowledged as a great genius—whatever he was, his Morty at least was not drunk.

Dixon took off his hat and hung it up again, laid his coat with his usual dainty care over the back of the seat, lifted his coat-tails—catch him sitting on them—with deft precision, and sat down promptly in his chair.

"Will you have the beef after all, sir?" anxiously inquired the head waiter, offering the plate.

“Antonio, Sebastiano, Stephaniello, Basseano, Angostino!” returned Dixon solemnly. “I’ll have beef, I’ll have mutton, I’ll have steak; nay, I’ll have ye merry onion, ye bland potato and ye bitter bass! Yea more, I’ll have ye cheese which hoppeth, and ye cucumber which scruncheth, and ye strawberry ice which chilleth.” He snatched at the plate and began gobbling the beef. “Moreover,” he called out after the departing waiter, with his mouth full, “hie ye hither with the staff of life. Likewise, bring me butter in a lordly dish.”

“Right, sir,” said the waiter, beaming all over his cheerful face. He had known Dixon for years, and had served him in the days when his dinner had often been bread and cheese because he could not afford better; and the man who had risen watched the young fellow who was rising, and often wondered to himself if, by chance, one of these fine days in the future he, too, might not become celebrated because he had once been the favourite waiter of the boy who had come to London without a penny and without an introduction, and who had in such a short time gone so far.

“Dixon,” said Reginald Carew solemnly, “perhaps, now that you’ve come to your senses, you will kindly explain.”

“Explanations later,” mumbled Mortimer, cramming his mouth full. “At present I’m eating.” He took an enormous piece of beef on the end of his fork and bowed to it. “Salutations, O brother ox! You did not die in vain!” He rammed the piece into his mouth, and nodded with his infectious gaiety at Carew. “Don’t bother asking me questions. Talk about yourself.”

Carew needed no second telling. If there was one thing he loved on earth better than another it was talking his own affairs over with a friend. When that friend happened to be Mortimer, so interesting did he find himself he could have talked all night. He plunged into the delightful subject without delay. His flat at Victoria, which he had only lately acquired. The charming girl, with the gold hair and the Chinese Chow, who lived in the flat adjoining his, with her aunt. The dinners he had eaten; the dances he had been to; the pretty girls he had flirted with; his tailor’s bills; the pretty widow he was “on” with. The girl at the Gaiety he had sent flowers to. The ripping old uncle who had increased his allowance by three hundred pounds.

The new shape of his ties. The new colour of his socks. On and on he babbled, the while Mortimer Dixon ate, and ate, and ate!

Gods, how he did eat!

Meat, fish, soup, pudding, roast beef, mutton cutlets, chicken, salad, asparagus, potatoes, beans, beer, champagne and strawberry ice. Down they went, one after the other, and he never turned a hair.

"Good Lord!" cried Carew, regarding him with envy, "you've the digestion of an ox."

"I need it," said Mortimer grimly. "For all I know, this meal will have to last me a week."

"A week!" Carew leaned forward with sudden eagerness and dropped his voice to a sudden whisper. "Do you mean you're out on a chase?"

Dixon nodded.

"So that's why you were so queer when you came in at first?"

"Yes."

"A big thing?"

"The biggest I've tackled yet."

"Are you going to tell me anything about it?"

"Not yet. Go on talking about yourself. I want to hear about the new flat, and your domestic arrangements. Do you keep a man?"

"I'm going to later on. My uncle wants me to bring one of his orderlies, who's had a smash-up, back from Berlin. Ripping chaps they are, too. He'll come back with me next month."

Dixon drew his cup of coffee slowly toward him, and took up a lump of sugar with the tongs. "And so for the present you keep a char? Why a char?"

"What do you suppose I keep?" said the other young man, laughing. "A lily-handed virgin in a cap and apron? Or do you think I make my own beds?"

Dixon dropped the sugar into his cup. "You've got lots of nice things about in your new place, I suppose?"

"Ripping. The old boy stumped up like a Trojan. Why do you ask?"

"Chars aren't always the most reliable people to trust with beautiful things."

"Oh, this one's different," said Carew unconcernedly. "She used to be a parlourmaid at my aunt's. The old

girl is as safe as a house, bless her! She wouldn't touch a thing to save her life."

Dixon struck a match and lighted his cigarette. "Good for you to get such a treasure. I suppose she sleeps at your flat?"

"No, my son; she sleeps at home."

"Oh, married, is she? Dixon threw the end of his lighted match into his saucer.

Carew's intelligent glance went across the table and stayed with his friend. "What's the joke, Dicky? You seem mighty keen on chars."

"I am," said Dixon quietly. "Where does your char live?"

Carew stopped smoking in his amazement. "My dear chap, how should I know? She comes at eight and leaves at seven. That's good enough for me."

"But it isn't good enough for me," said Dixon quietly. "Get your hat, old boy. I want you to take me up to your flat."

Carew drew out his watch and looked at it and shook his head. "Can't be done, old man. In half-an-hour I'm off."

"Off where?"

"Berlin. Of course, you never got my wire, so you don't know. My uncle has wired for me to come over at once. He's got the gout. That's why I wanted you to dine with me to-night so that we might have a bit of a jaw before I went. Anything I can do for you in Germany?"

"No. Something you can do for me over here."

"It's done, old boy. What is it?"

"Lend me the latchkey of your flat while you are away."

Carew's response was characteristic. He took out his key chain, slipped off the latchkey and pushed it quietly across the table to his chum.

"It's a tall order," said Dixon slowly, looking first at the latchkey and then at his friend. "If you've the slightest hesitation about the matter, tell me so frankly—I shall understand."

"If it were the key of the Bank of England, and in my power to give it to you," said Carew quietly, "it would be yours."

Dixon's fine young face flushed like a girl's. "Thanks," he said, as quietly as the other had spoken. "It's only what I expected from you, but it's ripping to feel that you think

that way of me. That kind of thing doesn't make a man put on frills, it makes him humble. It makes him want more than ever to come up to the high-water mark laid down for him by good chaps like you."

"That's all right." Carew answered him roughly to hide his own feeling. "Shut up, and take the key."

Dixon put out his hand and picked the key up. "I can't explain what I want it for, you know," he said slowly.

"Who asked you to?" returned Carew.

"You quite understand I may want to go there at all kinds of hours?"

Carew laughed out aloud. "My dear man, if I give you my latchkey, I give it that you may use it—how you like, as you like and when you like. You may live there all day and sleep there all night. You needn't be nervous, for I've arranged with Mother Sard to sleep at the place while I'm away."

An extraordinary expression flashed across Dixon's mobile countenance, but Carew did not notice it, for no sooner had it come than it had gone. "Oh, so the char's going to sleep at your flat in your absence, is she?"

Carew grinned all over. "If you find the old girl's inconvenient, my boy, turn her out. Now I must be off. Sure you've quite finished? Couldn't you manage *another* mouthful?"

Dixon glanced at the array of empty dishes and heaved a prodigious sigh. "I wish to the Lord I could."

"Well, you haven't done yourself so badly," laughed Carew, reaching for his muffler. "What I would give to have your appetite!"

"You do my work, my son," returned Dixon grimly, "and I'll guarantee you'll be able to eat like me."

The two young men took down their hats and went out.

"My car's waiting round the corner," said Reginald Carew. "Can I give you a lift?"

"Thanks," said Dixon. "I'm going home to my bed and sleep."

"Virtuous child!" said the other, laughing lightly. Then a shadow crept across his bright young face. "Dicky," he said slowly, "it sounds like a Stiggins, but I wish to God I led a life like you."

"I wish to God you did," Dixon answered him earnestly.

He threw his arm round the younger man's shoulder. "Why don't you?"

"Can't, dear boy! I'm all right as far as the drink goes, but I'm as weak as water where the women are concerned."

"So am I," said Dixon, with a sudden impulse.

For all his engaging frankness, as far as the real intimacies of life were concerned, Dixon was a strangely reserved man, but, at that moment, a sudden need for self-expression seized him and, for once in his life, he lifted the dark veil from his own innermost heart. "I'd be the same as you are, old boy, far worse, I daresay, if it wasn't for that dear little girl of mine I'm going to marry. It's the thought of her that has kept me strong in the face of temptation, not because I am strong myself."

The elegant young figure shifted uneasily under the kind, restraining hand. "It's all very well for you, old chap. You've got a girl who believes in you and loves you. I haven't."

"Then get one," said Dixon eagerly. "You're spoiling your chances of future happiness messing about with all these women who aren't worth a second thought. There are heaps of good women, just as pretty as the others, and just as amusing. Find one and marry her, and cut yourself free from all these others. You'll be sorry if you don't."

The day was not far distant when Carew remembered those words and acknowledged their truth in bitterness of spirit, in the hour of his terror and disgrace, but as he stood there that night, though he knew very well in his heart he was a fool not to do as the other advised him, he only laughed at Dixon, and told him not to preach.

"I'll think it over, parson, and some of these fine days, if you'll find me a sweet little girl like that sweetheart of yours, I'll turn over a new leaf. Till then, good-bye, and good-night."

The two young men clasped hands in a warm, close grip.

"Reggie," said Dixon earnestly, "I may be right and I may be wrong about this job of mine that I'm on, but if I'm right"—his blue eyes flashed in the darkness—"and I pull it off, I shall owe it in great part to you. I sha'n't forget what you've done for me to-night. If the day ever comes when I can do anything for you, call on me to do it. I shall be there."

He was there right enough when that day came, as come

it did. But that day lay in the shadowy future, and as they parted light-heartedly and went, the one to his train, the other to his bed, they little thought of the anguish of body and soul that would torment both of them before they stood under the flaring lights of a London restaurant, hand clasped in hand, once again.

They went down the street together to the corner where the car was drawn up. Carew's foot was on the step when a thought suddenly struck Dixon and he caught hold of the other, forcing him back.

"I'm a fool!" he exclaimed. "The hall porter at Dashley Gardens and your old char don't know me from Adam. Your latchkey is not a patent of respectability, and they may very well refuse me access to your flat in your absence. You had better give me a card."

Carew took out his silver card-case, and leaning against the lamp-post scrawled a few lines in pencil across his card. The light fell straight down on to his shirt-front where his coat hung open, and Dixon's keen eye, informed by his passionate love of perfection, caught appreciatively at the exquisite precision of the multitudinous little tucks.

"That's a nice little cheap shirt you've got on," he remarked sarcastically.

"Not so dusty," said Carew, who prided himself on his shirts.

"Where did you get it?"

"Paris." He grinned as he scrawled his name. "There's half-a-dozen of 'em done up in a box at Dashley Gardens; if you touch one of 'em, I warn you there'll be murder! I know what *you* are, you old beggar, when it comes to shirts!"

One of those queer flashes of imagination which Mortimer Dixon was wont to call his inspiration came upon him at that instant. "I'll annex the whole half-dozen and dazzle young ladies in your borrowed glories!" he exclaimed. "You'll never know. I've got a cleaner that turns things out like new."

"Dear ass!" remarked Carew composedly, "but they ain't cleaned. They're washed."

"What laundry?"

Carew burst out laughing. "Dicky," he said solemnly, "if you don't take care you'll be catching the new disease called Questionitis. You've done nothing the whole evening

but pump me about my char's domestic duties and now, here you are at it again, wanting to know where she gets my shirts washed."

Once again a light like a flash from a searchlight flared across Dixon's face. "So she gets them washed for you?" he cried. "Where, Reggie, where?"

"How the devil should I know, my young Encyclopædia," laughed Carew. "Somewhere down Whitechapel way, I believe. Ask Mother Sard." He jumped into the great car and laid his hand on the wheel. "Sure I can't drop you anywhere? Right-o. Then I'm off. So-long! Be good!" The car began to draw away. "And above all," he screamed, over his shoulder, "don't touch my shirts!"

"Roast chicken, lettuce salad, strawberry tart and a bottle of champagne," said Dixon to himself, as he stood on the curbstone watching the great car taking its brilliant way down the crowded Strand, "and she's a char, and she takes his shirts to be washed in Whitechapel!" He slipped his hand into his pocket, and his strong young fingers closed round the key of the flat with a grip of iron. "The key to the whole solution, or I'm a Chinaman!" He nodded his head in the way which, with him, always betokened the most intense secret satisfaction, turned on his heel, and before Big Ben had boomed out eleven, with the key of the flat in Dashley Gardens clasped in his hand, and the picture of the girl he loved under his pillow, was fast asleep in bed.

CHAPTER VI

SLEEP, so the modern scientists tell us, is the peculiar privilege of the young, the criminal and the great.

Under which particular heading Mortimer Dixon would have been classified it is difficult to say. He was not young as the term is understood by the scientist; he often said of himself that he had in him a distinct criminal tendency, and, though he had gripped tight hold of the lowest rungs of the ladder which leads to fortune, his best friends could not have considered themselves justified in calling him great.

Be that as it may, however, he certainly slept well.

He had the faculty which history records as one of the

chief characteristics of the great Napoleon, of being able to sleep at any given instant in the day. He would go to sleep in a tramcar, he would go to sleep in a motor bus ; he would go to sleep rolled up like a cat on the hearthrug. The Plump Little Party had been heard to declare that once he had gone to sleep standing upright in her father's backyard.

Be that as it may, given a bed and a pillow, sleep followed as a matter of course. No matter how worried he was, no matter how super-excited his brain, no matter how he had overtaxed his nervous system in the day, or what strain he might be called upon to put on his physical resources on the morrow, he was able at will to put it all from him, and to sleep the dreamless sleep of a child the minute he got into his bed.

Small wonder then that the next morning he arose refreshed both in body and soul.

Happy young fellow ! The gods themselves might have envied him, as, spruce, spotless and alert, with fifty pounds in his pocket, and half-a-dozen rashers of bacon and two poached eggs in his inside, he started on his way up Northumberland Avenue, and by a quarter to nine was hailing the taxi he had used the night before, which carried his lucky number.

The morning was delicious. The air, blowing fresh and clear over the river, went to his head like wine. The sunlight, flashing on the beautiful Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, filled him with a sense of rare emotion which equalled in its intensity many a lesser man's greatest capacity of joy.

"Ye gods ! but it's good to be alive !" he cried to the driver, who had recognised him the instant he set eyes on him.

"I was thinking that myself, sir."

"Bit cleaner than last night ? What !" Mortimer Dixon grinned at the man, who grinned back.

"Had two d's worth of wash and brush up, sir !"

"That's about it." He eyed the chauffeur's spotless white coat enviously. "Lucky beggar ! I wish *I* could wear a coat like that." A connecting link of thought suddenly arose in his brain, and he leaned forward eagerly.

"You garage in Whitechapel, don't you ?"

"Yes, sir."

"Lots of Chinese laundries down there. Ever tried one ?"

"No, sir. I wash my clothes myself."

The connecting link snapped, but Dixon was in far too buoyant a mood to heed it. "Good man," he cried; "you're one after my own heart. My offer of last night, when I come into my millions, holds good."

"I'm on, sir."

"I'd rather you were off," said Dixon, laughing. "I've the prettiest girl in London waiting for me on the doorstep." He gave him the address. "Buck along, there's a good chap."

Buck along they did. My word! It was not more than ten minutes before the taxi drew up at the modest little house in Acacia Road.

There on the front doorstep, as he had prophesied, stood the Plump Little Party waiting, with her pretty brown eyes all alight with anticipation, and her fresh round cheeks flushed with joy. The sight of that sweet little apparition in her spotless white linen frock, and her pretty new hat with its wreath of pink roses, put the finishing touch for her lover to the ecstasy of that summer day.

Before the taxi had stopped he was out of it, up the steps, and had whirled her off the doorstep into the little hall. "Oh, you sweet little duck!" cried Mortimer under his breath, hugging and kissing her behind the hall door. "You're as sweet and fresh as this lovely June morning. Until I saw you standing there on the doorstep, I never knew how pretty you were, nor how much I loved you before." He kissed her again rapturously. "Darling little duck, when I think of you waiting all those hours for me at Victoria, yesterday, I could kill myself. But what was I to do?"

"It's all right, darling," she answered him softly. "I don't mind."

"But I do," returned Dixon, with conviction. "And the worst of it is I've something else to confess." He took her dear little face between his two hands and looked down at her. "I was so busy all day yesterday that I forgot all about you, and it's no good saying I didn't. Can you forgive me?"

Into the soft upturned brown eyes came a look of passion that Mortimer, dearly though he loved her, was too young to understand. "There is nothing to forgive."

"But there is," cried her lover ardently. "I'm a beast. I know it. And the worst of it is, it's no good saying I won't do it again, because I'm perfectly certain I shall. But

it isn't because I don't love you, my sweet, that I seem to forget you. For, as true as there's a God above me, apart from my work, which is my life, there's not a thought of my brain, not a beat of my heart, not a drop of blood in my whole body that doesn't belong to you."

"Oh, Morty!" she whispered, and sighed for sheer happiness as his strong young arms held her closer and closer against his heart.

"You and my work. My work and you. That's my life," said he.

"And my life is nothing but *you*," thought the girl tenderly. But she was a wise little girl and she kept that to herself. "Is it another adventure?"

The light in his eyes almost dazzled her as she looked up at him. "Yes."

The sweet face lost some of its beautiful colour. "Not dangerous?"

Her lover hesitated a moment. He would have given the world to have lied to her, but somehow he could not. God knows he was no prig, the gallant young fellow, but, side by side with his passion for personal cleanliness, he had enshrined an ideal of even more exquisite loveliness, the simple and spotless truth.

"Not dangerous?" The tender arms tightened round his neck.

"I don't know," he answered her simply. "If you'd asked me that question yesterday morning I should have said no, without the slightest hesitation; but to-day I'm not quite so sure."

"Oh, Morty!"

The words were a mere whisper, but his keen ear caught them, and he bent his face to hers. "Dearest, you're crying." He crushed her to him. "I'll give it up," he whispered passionately. "Shall I?"

The girl shook her pretty head. "Of course not."

"I will if you want me to."

"I don't."

"Darling! That's my own girl. I would have done it if you had asked me, but it would have broken my heart."

"Is it a wonderful adventure?"

"I don't know, darling, but I hope it is."

For a moment there was silence, the girl hiding her face in her lover's arms.

Had the veil which divides the invisible from the visible, the tangible from the intangible, the seen from the unseen world been lifted, that little commonplace hall, in a third-rate suburb, would have been found to be peopled by exquisite spotless beings invoked on behalf of the man she loved, by the unspoken prayers of a commonplace little English girl.

But the veil is not lifted, and our eyes are held that we may not see. The ardent young fellow felt nothing but the burning of young love, and, fire as fierce, young ambition. "It's glorious," he said, with a passion of triumph in his voice, "and I love it; but I won't have you worried. There must be no cryings and mopings, and darling, silly terrifyings, or I sha'n't be able to work."

"I sha'n't worry, darling." She raised her face and looked up at him. "And I sha'n't cry."

"That's my own girl. There's no need to. I'll take great care."

The quiet brown eyes looked up at him with a new light in their clear depths. "God will take care of you, Morty. I sha'n't worry, for you're in His hands."

The touch of mysticism which lay beneath the materialism of his nature rose up responsive to her words. No wonder he loved her. In her delicate tender way she seemed to supplement every lack of his own soul.

He stooped his tall head and kissed her, and, though possibly neither of them realised it, there was a new reverence in his kiss. Their young love had gone one step farther on the road to those depths and heights of human emotion which are the only things really worth having in life.

Then—for they were very young—the tension relaxed and they came down to earth with a bang. Their great moment was over although its traces, invisible but potent, remained. They were no mystic devotees, this young pair of lovers, but just a couple of happy young people full of the joy of youth and health and love.

The Plump Little Party looked at herself in the glass, patted her hair, put her hat straight, and pulled down her veil, while her lover watched her admiringly, and over her shoulder he straightened his immaculate tie. Then he shoved his hand into his pocket and showed her the fifty pounds—ten new lovely bank-notes, all white and crackling, ready to be turned into tables and chairs.

"You bet I made them give me new ones," Mortimer Dixon cried. "The stuffy old cashier down at the office said he couldn't see any difference, and that old ones would have done just as well. But I wouldn't have 'em. New bank-notes for our new tables and chairs! Our very own, just think of it!" He turned and caught her to him, and stuffed the bank-notes into his pocket again. "Come along, do," he cried boyishly. "If I don't begin to do something to make the time pass quickly, I shall burst for sheer joy before the end of July."

"We must be very, very careful," said the Plump Little Party, clutching her little bag.

"Careful be blowed! I'd like to buy the whole shop."

So would everybody. But it's one thing to want to buy the whole shop, and another to have the money to buy it with!

When they got inside Mr Maple's establishment, and saw the miles and miles of lovely chairs and tables, all shiny and polishy, waiting there for people who were going to be married to buy them, poor Dixon's brave young heart began to go down.

"It's not fifty pounds one wants, but fifty thousand pounds," he said to the affable young shopman, who was showing them round.

"You can get a very nice little home together for five hundred pounds, sir, if you choose with care."

Now, oddly enough, five hundred pounds was the exact amount that Mortimer Dixon had got. He had not saved it, though he had been getting good money for over three years. He was a spendthrift by nature and had never put by a penny in his life. An old aunt had left it to him unexpectedly, and it was on the strength of that little legacy that Dixon was going to marry that year.

He put it into the bank the day he got it, and had never touched it since. In his secret soul he had determined to draw the whole of it out in one big fat cheque, and give it to his wife as a present on their wedding day. He had also determined to buy a house with it on the mortgage system. He had also had visions of keeping it lying handy, and investing it in a "sure thing" when some nice little speculative business at about fifty-per-cent. dividends turned up. He also had had ideas of starting a little business of his own, say an egg farm in the country, or a little restaurant in Soho, with his pet waiter from Gatti's at its head.

But when he saw the chairs and tables at Mr Maple's, and he conjured up a vision of his little sweetheart pouring tea out of fragile china in a Chippendale drawing-room, with pink brocade curtains and a velvet carpet to match! Or himself, at the head of the table, dispensing hospitality in a delicious little Sheraton dining-room, with a point-lace spread instead of a cloth! Or, more wonderful still, a wonderful room with white chintz curtains and pale pink roses, with a lovely dressing-table and all kinds of queer crystal pots with wonderful things inside! Scent for her dear little best handkerchiefs, and sweet-smelling powder for the tip of her dear little nose, and great fat silver brushes for her pretty brown hair, and a lovely brass bedstead with white lace curtains and fat white pillows trimmed with lace! A kitchen all full of shiny saucepans and white deal tables, and a splendiferous white bathroom, with a white bath and silver taps and a spray and a plunge and a shower! Why, then, naturally Mortimer Dixon, sensible fellow that he was, knew what he had saved up that five hundred pounds for! For what other purpose in the world could his good aunt have left it to him, if not to furnish a sweet little house for his sweet little wife!

Whatever his faults as a shopper, one super-excellent quality Mortimer Dixon certainly had. Once he had made up his mind that he was going to spend the money, it did not take him two winks of an eyelash to decide what he was going to have.

He darted along the departments, his blue eyes sparkling with fun and his straw hat on the back of his head, picking out chairs and tables, bedsteads and saucepans, with the rapidity and the ease of a millionaire!

The following of his profession had taken him into too many good houses not to have taught him something about the furnishing of a house, and this knowledge, applied to his own sense of beauty, enabled him to make his choice with an elegance of taste that made the shopman open his eyes.

The instant he caught sight of a thing he wanted, round flashed his face to the little girl behind him, and he would cry: "That's what I want. Like it?" To which the poor child, half off her head with excitement, would gasp, "Oh, Morty," and round would go Dixon's head with a satisfied nod to the smiling shopman. "Right you are! Stick it down!"

Whereupon the obliging shopman stuck it down.

Now five hundred pounds is a good deal of money, and if you are laying it out on coals, or cabbages, or chocolates, or even potatoes, it takes a lot of spending ; but if you are sticking down chairs and tables and carpets at Mr Maple's you can't stick down much !

For two heavenly hours Mortimer Dixon ordered furniture. Into the lift, out of the lift, up to the top, down to the bottom ; away he went, throwing into his purchasing just the same extraordinary fervour with which he went about his work.

He did not hesitate between brass and copper. *He* did not niggle between blue and green. *He* did not stand hovering on the brink torn between oak and walnut. Not he ! He knew exactly what he wanted ; whizzed around until he spotted it and then, with a chuckle of satisfaction and a " Like it, darling ? " over his shoulder, stuck it down.

Down and up, up and down the great shop he went, and the perspiring shopman, and the terrified Plump Little Party followed behind.

My word ! She was terrified ! It was like the first time her lover had taken her in a taxi, and she had not been able to enjoy her ride because she could *not* keep her eyes from watching the dreadful little tuppences on the taxi-meter jumping up and down ! Yes, it was exactly like the first day in the taxi, only a thousand times worse ! For then, at most, it had been a matter of shillings, and this time it was tables and chairs !

The more Dixon bought, the more reckless he got, and the more reckless he got, the more terrified the girl grew. Toward the end of the expedition, indeed, so frightened was she, that when her lover, radiant with smiles, lighted on a pale pink satin Recamier sofa, of classic design, and with a shout of delight stuck it down, it took her all her time to smile back when he looked at her over his shoulder, and not disgrace him and herself by breaking into sobs.

But, at the end of it all, as on the day of the first taxi, something wonderful happened that wiped all her terrors away. At a moment when Dixon and the shopman were vigorously wriggling in and out of chests of drawers to get at washstands, her brown eyes, panic-stricken at the thought of the money all this would cost, caught sight, through a curtained archway, of a little bed. With a kind

of little gasp of delight, as though in a strange country far away from home she had suddenly chanced on the face of a friend, she crept through the archway into the inner room.

It was the model of a little child's nursery. The rocking horse in the latticed window, the gilt cage with a stuffed canary inside, the bright grate shielded by a guard from the imitation fire; the little jug and basin covered with an embroidered towel and, most wonderful of all, in the corner the spotless little cot with an imitation baby inside!

The girl stood in the middle of the room and looked at it and, as she looked, the terror and the pain faded out of her eyes, and in their place came a wonderful shining. She stood there with bent head, as one who stands in a sanctuary, her little hands clasped softly before her as if she were saying her prayers. Her imagination, running riot like her lover's, waved its magician's wand and showed her wonderful things.

For her, the imitation fire leapt, dancing gaily with real flames, throwing out heat and light. For her, that spotless guard was hung with tiny clothes. For her, the inanimate bird came to life and flapped its golden wings, singing her strange songs that made her listening heart a nesting-place for all sacred and lovely things. For her, the wax doll became a living soul, lifting its dimpled arms, and calling to her softly by her name.

Her lover, no cleverer than most men, for all his genius, caught the glory on her face when he emerged from the washstands, and, after the manner of his kind, put it down to the credit of the chairs and tables.

"Little Duck!" he said to himself joyously. "I'll blow the lot in and chance it, if it makes her as pleased as that!" On the strength of which he stuck down two washstands instead of one.

The thought of that room and the strange, wild song of the bird, who, except for poets and mothers, did not know how to sing, sustained the little woman in the terrible hour that ensued. It kept her going under the trials of a fumed oak dining suite with copper clamps and a carpet which reflected the tones of both. It helped her to bear the shock of a revolving bookstand with a brass pole running through the middle, and a lamp with an orange silk shade of Empire design at the top. It even brought her through the ordeal

of a pink silk eiderdown, and a quilted pink satin cushion embroidered with roses to match.

But when it came to a Baby Grand at "forty-five pounds for cash" it deserted her altogether.

It was a very white little girl who stood with downcast eyes beside her lover when he announced that he had finished, and that was all he could get.

"And a very elegant little lot it is, sir," remarked the suave shopman, "if I may say so without offence."

"I know what's what," said Dixon gaily. "Will you keep these things for six weeks until we've got our flat?"

"With pleasure, sir."

"About paying. I'm not one of your hire purchasers, you know, I believe in cash."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'll send you a cheque to-morrow, first post. Tot it up."

In an awful silence the shopman totted it up. "Five hundred and forty-nine pounds, fifteen shillings and sixpence, sir."

"Right. I'll give you fifty pounds down as a deposit. No, I won't. I'll give you a cheque instead." He slipped a sovereign into the gratified shopman's hand. "To-morrow morning first post. Good-morning. Come along, Ducks." Dixon stooped over the Plump Little Party, who had collapsed on a chair behind him, and held out his hand.

She caught at it. She actually required it to steady herself by its support. Her legs trembled so that she literally felt that she had not got the strength to stand.

"Why, you're as white as death," cried her lover, aghast. "You ought to have had some milk in the middle of the morning. What a thoughtless beast I am! Come along into Shoobred's and let's get lunch."

"I'd rather go home," she said faintly.

"Bosh!" said her lover. "You don't stir till you have had lunch."

Too exhausted to argue, she tottered feebly after him out into the street, and followed him into the shop.

Five hundred and forty-nine pounds, fifteen shillings and sixpence!

Five hundred and forty-nine pounds, fifteen shillings and sixpence!

Five hundred and forty-nine pounds, fifteen shillings and sixpence!

The figures whirled round and round before her until she could have screamed.

"Poor little Love," said Dixon tenderly, as he put her into a chair at an empty table by the window. "She's not a pink rose any longer. She's a little white snowdrop." The tenderness in the dear voice put the finishing touch to her misery. Try as she would she could *not* keep it back any longer. She just turned her face to Tottenham Court Road and burst into tears.

"Darling dear, whatever's the matter?"

She shook her head. She simply couldn't speak.

"Good God! you don't feel ill, do you?"

The sudden fear in his eyes restored her sufficiently to gasp out: "No."

"Then what on earth's the matter?"

She mopped her eyes despairingly. "The f . . . f . . . fur . . . the furniture!"

"The furniture! Why, don't you like it?"

"Oh, Morty." She dissolved into tears again.

"But, tell me, darling, what is it? If you like the furniture what's upsetting you so?"

"The . . . the . . . the expense!"

"The expense?" Dixon stared at her as if she had gone mad. "Do you mean it's cost too much?"

She had no words left to answer him. She just sobbed.

If it had been anybody but just the Plump Little Party Mortimer Dixon would have been furious. To the end of his life he never could be made to understand the value of money. He had the pleasantest theories on the question of expenditure. If you wanted a thing and had the money you got it. If you had not, you said "Damn" and went without.

As for the bill at Maple's, he had a fairly decent head for figures in a small way and, though apparently spending recklessly, he had known to within a pound what he was about. He was going to be married. He was going to have a flat. Naturally he wanted some furniture. He had got five hundred pounds in the bank and fifty pounds in his pocket. He had spent only five hundred and forty-nine pounds, fifteen shillings and sixpence, therefore he was four shillings and sixpence to the good. Then, in heaven's name, what was all the fuss about!

"Your order, sir?" A waiter stood at his side.

"Clear soup, salmon and green peas, mutton cutlets and asparagus, and strawberry ice," a coin clanged on the salver, "and half-a-bottle of Heidsieck."

Exactly what she had expected. All the luxuries of the season, with champagne as a climax! She stopped crying.

"Morty," she said, "I can't do it. It's no use; I can't."

"Can't do what?"

"I can't go on like this. It will kill me. I would rather not marry you at all."

"Not marry me! Do you know what you're saying?"

"Yes, Morty, and I mean it." She turned and faced him in the window, and her brown eyes, still suffused with tears, were steady as well as sad.

"You mean you don't love me?"

"I worship you." The pretty mouth trembled. "But I'd rather not marry you, if it's going to drag you 'down.'"

"You drag me down, you sweet little duck? Why, that's the only thing in the world that is going to drag me up."

"Not if we begin like this." The soft voice suddenly became determined and firm. "We have no right to take a flat at one hundred pounds a year and buy six hundred pounds worth of furniture."

"But we can pay for it, darling. It isn't as if we were going into debt."

"It's almost the same. It's the only money you have in the world and when that bill is paid there won't be a penny left."

"But I can make more again, can't I?"

"You always spend every penny you make, Morty. Supposing you were ill?"

"I'm never ill."

"Supposing I were?"

"I won't let you get ill!"

A tremulous little smile flashed out in answer to his, but she shook her head, determined to have her say. "I might be all the same. Besides——" She stopped short and looked up at her lover helplessly.

"Besides what, love?"

She was not one of those up-to-date girls who say anything to a man that comes into their heads. She was just a little simple girl learning her own lesson, in her own way, out of the book of life. But she had not listened to that strange, wild

song of the bird in its gilt cage for nothing and, though her lips trembled and though her little face flushed pink, she picked up her courage, and it came out. "I don't think we ought to be thoughtless and selfish any longer, Morty," she said soberly. "When people are going to marry, they ought to think of these things."

The look of tender amusement went out of his face, and he looked very soberly back at his little sweetheart in his turn. "You sweet little soul," he said to her, "what have I done to deserve a girl like you!" Without a thought of the crowd of fashionable shoppers languidly eating their lunches, he picked up the little hand that lay trembling on the table and kissed it. "I was wrong and I'm sorry. But, oh! my sweet, I did want you to have a beautiful home."

"I shall have the most beautiful home in the world if I have you."

"If you look at me like that, I shall snatch you up and kiss you before the assembled multitude of chickens and chops, not to mention the tongues in aspic." His sunny smile shone out at her. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Whatever you think right, darling."

"Right-o. But I make one condition: if I don't buy the chairs and tables, you'll eat your lunch."

"Oh, Morty!" her brown eyes adoring him, "I'll do anything you like!"

Oh, that little sweetheart of his! She was not what the world calls clever, but she was very wise.

CHAPTER VII

BACK went Mortimer Dixon to Maple's and demanded to see the head of the firm. It was not a pleasant thing he had to do, so he wanted to do it quick. All said and done, he was just a little to be pitied. It is not the nicest thing in the world when you have been swanking about, spending money at about the rate of five pounds a minute, to go and eat humble pie.

His face was rather grim, and his lips were set very tight as he followed the obsequious shopwalker, who had heard of his purchases, into the office sacred to the heads of the firm.

A man with a cold eye which belied a generous mouth, bowed, and motioned him to a chair.

But Dixon had had enough of chairs for one morning! He laid his hat on the table and stood looking straight down into the strong, calm face, which, under other circumstances, would have attracted him as few faces did.

"My name's Dixon," he said slowly. "I'm a journalist. I'm going to be married next month. I came here this morning with the girl I'm going to marry, to choose furniture for our flat. My bill came to five hundred and forty-nine pounds, fifteen shillings and sixpence. I've five hundred pounds in the London County and Westminster Bank, Covent Garden Branch, and fifty pounds in my pocket. I can pay it all right, but I don't want to. I want you to let me off."

"Indeed." The cold eye surveyed him quietly, taking him in. "May I ask why?"

"Because though I'm fool enough to be a spendthrift, I'm not such a fool as not to try to undo my folly when it's pointed out to me by one who is wise."

"What is it you propose I should do?"

"I want you to take the entire order back," said Dixon calmly. "Nothing has been delivered. Nothing has been touched. The only thing to the bad is the time of the assistant who served me, and that I'm prepared to pay for."

"Have you paid anything on account?"

"Fifty quid."

"Do you know the name or number of the assistant who served you?"

"A514."

The cold eyes flashed approval, instantly subdued. He drew his private telephone towards him, and called down an order to the counting-house to send up the assistant with the cheque. In the five minutes that ensued not a word passed between the two men.

Then A514 appeared with the cheque in his hand.

"Thanks. That's all." The head of the great firm took the cheque and nodded his head.

"Excuse me one moment," said Mortimer Dixon sharply. He thrust his hand into his pocket, and turned to the astonished shopman. "It isn't right because I've been an ass that you should suffer," he said coolly. "I don't know what your commission is, but in a decent firm like this it

can't be less than one per cent. I gave you a quid this morning. Here are the other four." He thrust the coins into the shopman's hand without more ado.

"But, sir, I couldn't dream . . . there's no necessity . . ." stammered the shopman.

"That will do. The gentleman is perfectly right. You can go."

A514 disappeared.

Dixon came back to the table and stood waiting. Once again the cold eyes looked him up and down.

"I thought you would prefer your own cheque back intact, Mr Dixon. Your adviser, who is so wise, will probably like it better so."

For the first time in the strange interview Dixon's face took on its normal expression. "That's awfully decent of you. You bet your boots she will." He took the cheque and looked at it grimly. "Have *you* ever been a fool?" he asked audaciously.

The generous mouth broke into a smile. "Yes, once."

"Thought so." Dixon stowed the cheque away in his pocket and reached for his hat. "Anyway, you've been jolly decent to me. Things only happen as one wants in story-books, but you never know your luck. Perhaps some day I'll get a chance of being decent to you. Some day I'll come back to buy those infernal things again. Good-day."

"Good-day."

The cold glance followed him out of the office, then the managing director summoned one of the head men of the firm. "Tell A514 that every article of the order given by Mr Dixon and countermanded this morning is to be put aside, and held in reserve. He will want them later on."

He returned to his writing. For him the incident was closed.

But it was not closed for Mortimer Dixon! He would not wait for the lift at Shoobred's but tore up the stairs three steps at a time.

"There you are, my pretty," he cried, flinging the cheque down in front of his sweetheart. "Take it and keep it. The five hundred pounds at the bank is for future emergencies. That's all you'll get to furnish our flat."

"Oh, Morty!"

She wanted to burst out crying again but she would not, for she knew it would vex her Morty. So she took up the

cheque and tucked it away in her little bag ; and, her pretty face all flushed pink, and her brown eyes bright with delight, she put her hand under the table and gave his hand a squeeze.

"Now gobble up your lunch, there's a darling," said Mortimer, "for I want to take you into the Park and tell you all about what I did yesterday."

"I *am* gobbling, Morty," said the "darling" tremulously.

It was a very funny kind of gobbling, like one of those dear little fluffy chickens in the window in Regent Street pecking at its food when it is first out of the egg ; but it served its purpose, and by the time she had had her ice, and drunk her champagne, the sweet colour was back in her cheeks, and she looked quite her dear little self again.

As for Mortimer Dixon, valiant trencherman though he was, he could not eat his lunch for looking at her, and the longer he looked the more wonderful he thought she was.

"How on earth you can put up with me, I don't know," he said to her as they bowled along toward the Park in their taxi. "I'm everything you most disapprove of. I don't go to church, and I waste money, and I bounce about and talk big, and do very little, and I don't care a damn for anyone or anything, when it comes to work ! And yet you love me. Why ?"

"Because you're you," said the little woman softly.

"I wonder if I am," said Mortimer Dixon thoughtfully. "I mean, I wonder if I'm the *me* you think me. You believe in me so, perhaps you overrate me."

She nodded her wise little head. "I don't."

"You never can tell. Perhaps I am only a bouncing, self-deceiving ass, after all."

"You aren't."

"And I shall never do any of those wonderful things that I'm always talking about."

"You will."

The shadow that had fallen over Dixon's fine young face lifted. "Oh, my sweet," he cried, "if it weren't for you, I should play the giddy goat, and go to the devil and spoil all my chances as the other chaps do. It's you who keep me straight. It's the thought of you in your spotless little room, in your spotless white frock, with your birds, and your flowers, sitting there, thinking of me, believing in me, praying for me ! It's that that makes a man of me. If ever

I do anything wonderful, my sweet, I'm such a bouncing ass that people will believe it's I who've done it, but, in reality, all the time I shall know it's you."

"Tell me all about this new adventure of yours," said the girl, looking at her handsome young lover with all her beautiful soul in her eyes.

Into the young journalist's blue eyes there flashed that curious little glitter which always came when he spoke of work. "Come and sit down under the trees," he said; "I can't talk here with all these people about."

So they left the broad path and walked over the bright green grass, and found two little green chairs standing quite apart by themselves under two great elms, and there they sat down and talked.

It was quite a secluded little spot. The sun blazed down on them out of the cloudless sky. The birds called softly to each other through the trees. The sound of the children's laughter in the distance came to them like far-away music, sweet and clear. It was all so fair, so sweet, they might have been miles away from the smoke, and the noise, and the dirt, and the terror of great London. Sitting there with her hand held closely in his and listening to the voice of the man she loved, the picture stamped itself on the young girl's heart, and she laid it away in the sweet treasure-house of her soul as one of the beautiful memories of her life.

"It's like this," said Mortimer Dixon, "I want to tell you the whole thing just as it comes to me. If I repeat myself, or contradict myself, don't stop me. I want to make it clear to myself just as much as I want to make it clear to you. I don't suppose you know, because you don't read the papers. . . ." He stopped short and flashed a look at her. "You ought to, you know. They're the history of the world."

"I will," said the Plump Little Party.

Dixon nodded his head. "Good. Well, in the papers there has been a lot of talk lately about what's called the Yellow Peril. That means the invasion of Europe by the Chinese. Not coming over here in a mass to make war with us, but coming over here in two and threes, tens and twelves, fifties and hundreds and thousands, and gradually, perhaps, tens of thousands, and settling down here amongst us. People used to think of them as something like animals or savages, and took no notice of it. But they are not.

They are the nation of the future. They are the most wonderful people in the world."

"Why are they so wonderful?" asked the girl.

"When *we* lived in caves, and tore our meat to pieces with our hands, and knew nothing but how to go out and kill wild beasts, and send a man to Kingdom Come if he had got the woman you fancied, or more food than you, when *we* were in that stage, China had a mighty civilisation of her own. She was great in commerce, wonderful in art. When *we* were digging the ground with stones for spades, to make a hole to hide in, China, resplendent in satins and jewels, was living in palaces made of sweet-smelling cedarwood, decorated with scarlet and gold. When *our* ideas of right and wrong were in the primitive stage of the standard of savages, China was evolving a code of morality and ethical religion which, until the coming of Christianity, for sheer beauty and wonder transcended anything the world has ever known." Mortimer Dixon let go the little hand he held, and turned round in his chair. "I'm not bothering you, am I?" he asked her.

She smiled at him with something of the tenderness that lies in a mother's face when she smiles at her child. "I love it," she said simply. "Go on, please; I want to understand."

He lifted the little hand lying on his knee and kissed it and took up his parable again. "All this, that I've just been talking about, was thousands of years ago. We have got on since then. We have got steamboats, and electricity and motor cars, and aeroplanes, and Marconigrams, and we are supposed to have reached the top note of art and luxury, but China remains the same. Silent, remote, self-supporting; entrenched within her mighty walls, she continues her way unmoved, let the outside world do what it will. She has the same morality, she follows the same customs, she holds fast to her own beliefs. With her untold wealth untapped, and her vast spaces unexplored, a living monument, linking the Present with the Past, China stands to-day the unknown, unacknowledged wonder of the world." Dixon paused and his eyes, alight with the thought of that miracle slowly unveiling itself in the far-away East, drank in with delight the graceful movements and the beauty of the floating butterflies, and the fitting birds.

"Fifty years ago," he went on slowly, "China was a

mystery, a weird conception known only to a stray explorer. To-day, China is waking from her long sleep, and like the young people in Ibsen's play, *The Master Builders*, Europe is beginning to tremble, for she hears young China knocking at her door."

"Why should Europe tremble if China is so great?" asked the girl.

"There are four hundred millions of Chinese. Four hundred millions! Think what that means. Their ways are not our ways. Their thoughts are not our thoughts. Their faith is not our faith. Their morality is not our morality. There are four hundred millions of them. If they chose to rise up and flock into Europe, what do you suppose would happen?"

"What?"

"They would absorb us," said Dixon fiercely. "Swallow us up. If China knew her own strength, and when she finds her own feet, unless the nations of the West coalesce together, China will be master of the world."

He stopped speaking, but the girl beside him sat motionless waiting for what has to come.

"That's the big side of the question," said Dixon suddenly. "Just a mere outline of the vague, shadowy terror which, one day, will take shape and form. The practical part of the thing now is, that the Chinese are beginning to come over here. Wherever the Chinaman comes, he brings his own civilisation. His language, his religion, his morality, his customs, his food, his pleasures and his vices, remain his own. He gives nothing, but he takes all. He learns our ways, he assimilates our ideas. He steals our arms, our knowledge, our men, and our money and, worst of all, he steals our girls."

"Do you mean he runs away with them?" asked his girl, opening her eyes wide.

Her lover looked at her. "I mean he marries them when he can, and he steals them when he can't." He stopped short and dragged his chair a little closer. "It sounds a strange thing to say," he said quietly, "but Chinamen seem to have an extraordinary fascination for a certain class of English girls. Most of them have money, and it appears they are generous. They work so hard, and they live so cheap that, if the fancy takes them, they have plenty to spend. I suppose that is at the bottom of it all," he said bitterly. "It

is contemptible to think of one's own countrywomen like that, but it is no good blinking facts. I suppose the truth is that these girls go off with these Orientals for the sake of what they can get."

"Oh, Morty! How can you!" So indignant was the Plump Little Party that she went quite pale.

"It does make one pretty sick to think of it, doesn't it?" said Dixon. "But it's true all the same. That's what all the fuss is about. That's the real Yellow Peril—that our women should intermarry with the Chinks. That's what all the papers are talking about. It's always like that in England. We shut our eyes to the thing until it's got too strong for us, then open them and begin screaming when it's too late. That brings me to my adventure."

"That's what I'm longing to hear." The soft little hand wriggled itself a little farther into her lover's.

"Three days ago, an Englishwoman, a widow of the respectable middle class, came tearing down to Scotland Yard and said she had lost her daughter, a pretty young girl of eighteen. The mother keeps a confectioner's shop and the girl is a typist to an ironmonger's firm, a biggish place down Whitechapel way. The girl used to leave home at a quarter past eight in the morning, and get home about a quarter to nine. Her mother thought the hours too long for her, so she wrote to the head of the firm. She got a letter back saying that there was no reason for her complaint, seeing that the girl left the shop every night at half-past six. The mother questioned her daughter, and after a bit it came out that, after she left the ironmonger's, she went to do typing for a Chinaman who had a room close by the shop. The mother was furious and said she must give up the work. The girl refused. She said the man was a perfect gentleman and treated her with the utmost respect; that all he did was to dictate stodgy letters about politics and things she couldn't understand, one evening, and she typed them out the next. Asked if he had given her any presents, she showed her mother a parcel of soft silk, two or three bits of embroidery, a fan and a bangle, nice enough in their way, but the whole lot not worth much. Still the mother wasn't satisfied, and insisted on the girl giving up her work. There was a fearful row, and the next morning, as soon as the daughter had gone to the ironmonger's, the mother went down to the address the girl had given her where she worked

for the Chinaman, and tried to see the man. That's quite clear so far, isn't it?"

"Quite clear," said the girl.

Dixon pulled his chair a little closer. "It's here that the mystery begins. When the mother got to the house in the morning, the people said he had gone away. The mother didn't like the look of it, and went straight off to the ironmonger's. The girl wasn't there. They had been wondering if she was ill. The mother saw the head of the firm, told him everything, and he advised her to communicate at once with the police. Before doing this, she went back home in the hope that the girl might be there. She rushed upstairs to see if there was any message or any sign of her having intended to go off. Her room was in perfect order. Her bed was made. She had fed her bird. Her clothes were all there. Everything was left as usual, but"—Dixon lifted his finger impressively—"hidden away in one of the drawers was a cedarwood box with a lace fan, and a string of jade beads interspersed with seed pearls."

"Oh, Morty!"

"That was enough for the mother. Off she went to the station and got hold of the police. They've been searching for the last week, but they haven't found either the girl or the Chink."

"The girl's lost!"

"The girl's lost! Three days ago Fleet Street got hold of the story. In the ordinary way I don't suppose they would have made much fuss about it. But there's been such a to-do about the Yellow Peril just lately, and one or two nasty cases of the same kind up at Liverpool and Cardiff, that the papers want, if possible, to try and work it up into a sensation! That's why they sent for *me*!"

"What have you found out?" the girl asked eagerly.

"I'll tell you that later. What I want you to do now is to ask me questions about what I've told you already. It doesn't matter tuppence how silly they are, just ask them. Coming fresh to it, you might just hit on something that has escaped me. That is the kind of help I want. Just you think it over quietly and then ask me anything, just as it comes into your head." He drew his chair away from her, shoved his long legs out in front of him, and tilted his straw hat over his eyes.

"There's no need to think it over," she said quietly.

"You've made it all so clear. But there are one or two things that I should like to know about."

"What are they?"

"First I would like to know if the girl and her mother got on well together, and cared for each other, or were they like some mothers and daughters, always having rows."

Dixon sat up eagerly. "You see! there's one point you've made already. I didn't think of that. I'll find that out." Out came his notebook and he jotted it down.

"Then I'd like to know if the girl had any lovers."

"Heaps of 'em," said Dixon promptly; "all the young men were after her—I told you she was a pretty girl—but she wouldn't look at one of 'em, her mother says, except a young rotter who hadn't a penny to bless himself with, and was no good at all. At one time there was a sort of understanding between them—not a proper engagement—but the mother was very bitter about it, and broke it off."

"I suppose, as they were so poor, the girl helped her mother with the money she earned?"

"She made seventeen-and-six a week, and gave her mother twelve bob!"

"Five-and-six isn't much if you've bus fares to pay out of it, and lunches."

"It was only a walk from her place to the ironmonger's. They gave her tea, and she always took her lunch."

"Still, five-and-six isn't much to buy clothes with!"

"Ah!" cried Dixon, "but she *didn't* have to buy them. Her mother had married beneath her. She has a sister who married well. She has a daughter, too, just about the same height and age as the girl that is missing, and she used to send her cousin all her clothes. Too good for her position, indeed, the mother told the police."

"Ah, then, that makes a difference."

"How a difference?" cried Dixon eagerly. "What is it you've got at the back of your head?"

"It's nothing; only I was just thinking that perhaps it was not because she was fond of the Chinaman that she went to work with him, but because she wanted to make more money to buy herself some clothes. How much did the Chinaman pay her?"

"She told her mother, a pound a week."

“ And she didn't give her mother that money ? ”

“ What do *you* think ? If she had, her mother would have known about the work.”

“ Then what did she do with it, if she didn't spend it on clothes ? ”

“ Bought sweets, I guess,” said Dixon, grinning. “ It isn't difficult to get rid of a pound.”

“ I don't think she spent it on sweets, Morty.” His sweetheart shook her wise little head.

“ If you nod your head like that, I shall have to leave off talking about work and make love to you,” said Dixon, snatching at her hand and kissing it. “ You look just like an adorable little mandarin. Why don't you think she spent it on sweets ? ”

“ Because her mother kept a sweet shop, so she could get as many as she wanted without.”

Dixon shouted with laughter. “ A second Daniel come to judgment ! ” he cried, slapping his leg with enthusiasm ; “ and what do *you* think she spent it on, pray ? ”

But this was too much for the Plump Little Party. “ Morty darling ! ” she cried, “ I've never seen the girl. How *can* I guess ? ”

“ Let me put my question in another way. What would you have spent it on ? ”

The sweet little face under the shady hat grew very soft. “ Perhaps I'd have saved it up to help *him*.”

“ Help who ? ”

“ The rotter, the one she liked, you know. He mayn't have been as bad as they thought.”

Dixon, who had been tilting up his chair, surveying her with mingled pride and amusement, brought his chair down on its four legs with a crash. “ Look here,” he said sharply, “ you are a jolly sight cleverer than you have any idea of. You have laid your little finger on one of the weak points in the Scotland Yard case.”

The delicate face flushed all over. “ Oh, Morty ! how can you be so ridiculous ? ” she said, laughing. “ I'm only just asking silly things.”

“ You go on being silly, my lamb,” responded her lover. “ Believe me, it's the silly things that are the important ones in this life. The greatest inventions in this world have been started by silly chances. The greatest criminals on earth have been brought to justice through doing silly things.”

Go on asking me questions. You are helping me more than you know."

"Tell me what happened at the house where the girl used to work with the Chinaman, when the police went there."

"Nothing happened, my sweet. The people were perfectly respectable people who had been there for years. The man is a plumber. Their children were grown up and married, and so they let off the upper part of their house. They said the Chinaman seemed to them a perfectly respectable man. He saw the card in the window about six months ago; came in, and took the room. The only reference they required was a cash reference, and he always paid his rent in advance. He had his meals out and gave no trouble. An English charwoman used to come in and clean up his room every day. He spoke very little English and they understood that he had got a laundry of his own in Whitechapel. They said they never wanted a nicer lodger than he was."

"Did the people know about the young girl coming to do his typing?"

"Yes. At first the woman of the house was a bit upset as to whether it was all right, but when they saw the girl, so pretty and superior and so well dressed, and she explained to them she wanted the work so badly to help her mother, it put their minds at rest. She came every evening regularly except Saturday, used to go straight up to his room, and begin to type at once. The first evening or two they listened outside the door, but there was nothing that anyone could take exception to, and, as often as not, the Chinaman himself was not there. After a very few evenings they never gave the matter a thought, but took her coming as a matter of course. He used to come down and see her out every evening, and open the front door for her, but he never went with her even the length of the street. The plumber's wife told the police his manners were beautiful and his hands were like a girl's. She said she was quite sure he was a gentleman come down in the world."

"What reason did he give them for leaving?"

"No reason at all, my sweet child, for the best of all possible reasons, he didn't leave."

"Didn't leave?"

"It was a Thursday night," said Mortimer Dixon, ticking the days off on his fingers as he spoke, "when the mother of the girl wrote to the ironmonger about the hours being too

long for her girl. On Friday the ironmonger wrote to the mother saying her daughter left his shop every night at half-past six. That same night the mother and the girl had the row. Saturday morning the Chinaman told the plumber's wife he was going away for a few weeks, and paid the rent six weeks in advance. He locked his door, gave the plumber's wife the key, and walked out of the house."

"Had he no luggage?"

"Not even a bag. So you see it was a Saturday morning that the Chinaman left his room and the girl disappeared. Looks a bit quizby, doesn't it? Mind if I smoke, darling?"

"Fancy asking!"

He took out his match-box and lit a cigarette. The soft rings of smoke mounted vaporously into the clear atmosphere, adding an exquisite touch of ethereal beauty to the glory of the afternoon.

"I suppose they looked in the Chinaman's room when there was the fuss about the girl?"

"You bet they did! They sent a couple of men down from the Yard and they turned the place upside down. But they found nothing. Just the furniture of the room, a little bowl of fine china, and a pair of ivory chopsticks, and a couple of white cotton suits. The typewriter was an old one which he had evidently bought second-hand, and so far has not been traced."

"And the charwoman who used to come and clean out his room?"

"She has disappeared too."

"They haven't found her?"

"*They* haven't, but I think *I* have. That's where *I* come in!" He drew his chair closer to hers and roughly outlined for her in a few rapid words the events of the day before. When he told her about the flower girl and the pink "fevver" she laughed softly. When he told her about the cellar and his bumping down the steps into the darkness, her little hand went out to his in a kind of agony, and her pretty face went white. When he came to the black velvet curtain, and the laundry, and the chicken and the strawberry tart tumbling out of the basket on to the floor she clapped her hands with delight, as if she were a child hearing a fairy tale. But when he came to the strange, white room with the gorgeous red and gold hidden away under the great white sheet, she gasped for breath.

“ Oh, Morty ! ” she whispered, in horror-struck tones ; “ *a coffin !* ”

Dixon shouted with laughter. She looked so pretty, so young, so sane, so set apart from the morbid fantastic underworld of life, in her white frock under the green trees in the sunlight, that he told her that if it hadn't been for the park-keeper he would have taken her in his arms and gobbled her up. “ You're the sweetest little duck in all England,” he said, in a perfect rapture. “ Get up and come to Buzzard's and eat chocolates and ices, and let's forget all this rubbish I've been telling you. What on earth has crime and sin and Chinks and coffins got to do with *you !* ”

But his little sweetheart did not stir. “ If they have got to do with you, they have got to do with me. Tell me what does it all mean ? ”

“ I don't know, yet,” her lover answered her, and the look that she knew so well and rejoiced in so proudly, the look that meant Mortimer Dixon the worker, came over his proud, young face. “ I don't know yet,” he repeated, “ but I am going to find out. There's some mystery behind all this pretty little story of the Chinaman who keeps a laundry in a cellar, and is accused of abducting a pretty English girl. I'm not saying that the man I found yesterday was the man, but that doesn't make any difference to me. The Yellow Peril's all right in its way, and a mighty big question from a political and social point of view. But it isn't the Yellow Peril or the Chinaman who has abducted the girl that my chief's after. That's all very fine for reporters and beasts with cameras, but it don't come out in the wash with me.”

“ What makes you think that, Morty ? ” the girl asked him quietly.

“ That's exactly what I can't tell you,” he answered her ; “ but I know it just as if I had been told. The minute I set eyes on the chief yesterday morning I knew something was up. There was a dozen of the other boys hanging about, waiting for a chase—two or three of them who are as clever as they can stick, and mad to get on—but he didn't take them, he sent for *me*.”

The pretty brown eyes filled with pride. “ What did the chief say when you went in ? ”

“ Not a word. He just shoved a cutting from Scotland

Yard across the table at me with the end of his quill pen and said, 'Look after this, Dixon, will you?' He didn't even stop writing; but I knew."

"How?"

"*HE* was walking down the corridor when I came out. He just gave me one look, and said in his pleasant way, 'Morning, Mr Dixon. Going chasing again?' I said, 'Yes, my lord.' He said, 'Not up in the air this time, Mr Dixon?' I said, 'No, my lord.' He said, 'Perhaps underground for a change. Wish you luck.' When he said that I went hot and cold all over. It was exactly the same words he said that night last year when I started out. I've nothing to go on, not a shred of proof, not a ha'porth of evidence. But I know it—a big thing!" His young voice rose triumphantly. "My instinct never deserted me yet. I feel it here." He leaned forward and laid his hand on hers. "If I bring this thing off, whatever it is, I'm a made man."

"Oh, Morty!" she whispered.

For a moment there was silence between them, and they sat locked hand in hand with their eyes fixed on each other's faces, both lost in thoughts that lay too deep for words. The girl was thinking of her lover. The man was thinking of his work.

Love and work! The two greatest factors of life.

What did Sheraton tables and pink satin cushions matter to them, who had such priceless treasures as these!

So they sat, hand in hand, and savoured their great moment in all the magic of its glamour, until it passed.

Then Mortimer Dixon, dreamer and lover, unclasped his hand from hers and got up. "I'm not going to tell you any more," he said quietly, "but I'll ring you up to-night, not later than ten, and tell you what I've done, and what I'm going to do. Anyway I sha'n't be at my own place for the next two weeks."

"Where will you be?"

"P'r'aps in the street; p'r'aps on the stairs; p'r'aps on the roof; p'r'aps in Carew's gilt bed with blue satin curtains; p'r'aps lying on my stomach in the Whitechapel cellar with my eye to a crack in the wall." His face changed and his voice dropped to a whisper: "But wherever I am, my sweet, on the roof, or in the cellar, on the seats of the mighty, or in the gutter, I shall be thinking of *you*."

"Oh, Morty!" Two great big tears rose in her eyes, and

rolled down her pretty, pink cheeks. "Be careful! Be careful!"

"You bet I'll be careful," said Dixon gaily, his spirits rising, as they always did, at the mere thought of work. "You don't think I'm a fool, do you?"

"I don't know," quavered the Plump Little Party miserably. "I'm often afraid you are."

"Gollypots!" Dixon shouted.

The dear little mite, so soft, so gentle, standing there looking up at him and telling him—Him, the dashing, bouncing, devil-me-care Dixon, whom everybody believed in, and who got there every time—that, she was not sure he was not a fool, proved quite irresistible. He chanced the park-keeper's stony eye, and there, under the green trees, he stooped and kissed her.

"I'm a fool, am I?" he said to her. Then at the touch of her soft lips his face changed. "Do you wonder I'm a fool?" he whispered passionately. "The touch of your sweet, soft face is like the flowers, and the light in your dear, brown eyes is like the glory of the sun, the sound of your dear, soft voice is like the cooing of a dove. I shall be a fool to the end of my life, my sweet, when I look at you." He kissed her again, and released her, and the light that no one ever saw in his eyes but the wise little girl from Brixton died out of them.

He was not one of those men whose one idea of passion consisted in hugging and kissing a girl. He knew that, deep down within his innermost being, his impulse towards women lay like a beast, ready to spring up and devour him as it had devoured many a good man before him. He had chained that beast and he was not going to let it out of its prison-house, not even for the girl he loved. "A weakness controlled becomes a strength," a wise old man had told him when he was little more than a boy. "Then I'm going to be strong," he had told the old philosopher proudly; and so he was—not without temptations, not without struggles, not without battles waged day in, day out, fierce and strong. He still had those fights with himself; but he had emerged victorious, and the reward was worth ten times more than the temptation, he told himself exultantly, for it is not the man who gives in, nor the man who has never been tempted, but the man who is tempted and does *not* give in, who attains the highest altitude of strength.

Though high-strung and sensitive to a degree, Dixon was strong, there was no doubt about that. When other young fellows were taking their girls out to dinner and a music hall, when other young men of his own age were packing their suit-cases and were going for the week-end up the river, he sat at home and worked. It is true he did not save the money he worked for; but no one is perfect, and to be thrifty was a lesson he never could or would learn.

But there was no doubt about his working. He limited himself strictly to seeing his sweetheart one afternoon every week, and then, as often as not, he talked half the time they were together about work. "Laugh away, you old chaps," he used to say when the other boys chaffed him. "Go and play footer, razzle-dazzle round the rink, and listen to the pretty band at the Exhibition if you can afford it. I can't. I've got my work to do."

"Work!" they used to shout back at him derisively; "poking into dirty old slums, nosing about into dirty old houses, talking to dirty old gone-unders, in search of Adventures. You can't find mysteries by looking for them."

"No," Dixon would answer them; "but when you *do* get hold of a mystery, you know where to look for the solution."

Be that as it may, whether he was right or whether he was wrong, he worked. And now his playtime was over again; and though he was dying to sit on in the beautiful Park and make love to the pretty girl beside him, the limit he had set for himself was reached, and he was not going to outrun it.

"Come on," he said briefly. "Time's up." Then he looked into the sweet little face so near his own, and—he was very human in spite of his genius—he hesitated. "It's too perfect to leave," he said softly. "I ought to go, but let's stay another half-hour."

But the Plump Little Party, who—though he did not realise it—knew her lover as the palm of her hand, shook her little head wisely. "Not another minute," she said firmly. "You'll only be sorry if you do."

"That's true," said Dixon, wondering naïvely how on earth she had guessed it. "Well—let's get it over as quick as we can. Come on." He turned away abruptly, and strode with his long legs so fast across the grass that the girl could hardly keep up with him.

"A likely looking lad," the park-keeper said to himself

as Dixon passed him at full swing. "Quarrel as usual, I suppose."

He had a nice habit of observation, the park-keeper, and plenty of opportunity to exercise it, but for once he was wrong. This lover and journalist striding in front of his little sweetheart, and bidding her almost roughly good-bye at the gates, had never been so passionately desirous of her company in his life.

"You quite understand?" he said to her as they stood on the pavement waiting for a taxi to come by. "It will be two weeks and perhaps three before I see you again. I will send you a wire every morning, and I will try and 'phone you once a day, but I can't say when. If it's a mare's nest I'm after, I shall know in a day or two. If it's what I think"—his eyes dilated—"God knows how long I shall be. But you won't worry? You will go out an hour every day, and you will go to bed early, and you will eat your meals, and not worry. Promise me."

"I promise."

"Good child," said Mortimer Dixon abruptly.

The taxi he had hailed drew up. He put her in, and they clasped hands once more.

"God bless you, Morty," said his sweetheart. "Good-bye."

She turned and waved to him at the corner, and little did he—for all his knowledge of men and women of which he was so proud—guess the passion of terror and love tearing at that gentle little heart. She sat up in her place bravely, keeping a smile on her face and wagging her little hand to him, in her own way as strong-willed and as self-controlled as himself.

CHAPTER VIII

THE pretty vision disappeared in the distance, and Dixon slowly replaced his hat. The casual passer-by would have taken him for one of the world's happy favourites—a good-looking young fellow with not a care or a trouble in the world. They would have been mightily surprised if they had known he was one of the most acute mentalities in Fleet Street—that hotbed of brains and daring—contemplating the dangers of the work he had in hand with the equanimity

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of a soldier suddenly summoned to war—that was just what he felt like—a soldier in whose ears the bugle call was sounding, suddenly calling him to take up arms.

A curious exultation of spirit filled him, as on another momentous occasion when she had said “God bless you” in bidding him good-bye. That homely old expression which means sometimes so little, and sometimes carries with it the deepest meaning in the world, that same expression had fallen on this, the hour of his starting on his new adventure, like a benediction alighting on his head from the lips of the girl he loved.

The coincidence—if such a thing can be called a coincidence—went to his head like wine.

He jumped into a taxi, went back to Duke Street, Adelphi, packed his suit-case and called the hall porter up. “I’m going away for a couple of weeks, Denning,” he told the man. “It may be three. Keep all letters, take in any parcels, collect all telephone messages, and have them ready to read me when I ring up.”

“You’re leaving no address, sir?”

“No.”

“The lady has been again, sir. Twice, to-day. She’s coming again at eight.”

A little suggestion which he had packed away at the back of his brain when he was talking to his sweetheart in the Park suddenly recurred to him. “Look here,” he said, “if she has been so often it may be something important. I’ll be back at eight to-night, tell her. Keep her if I’m late.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dixon took the key of his flat off his chain and put it together with a sovereign into the hall porter’s hand. “Have any telephone messages and wires that may turn up ready to hand when I ring you up.”

“In my pocket, sir. Thank you, sir. Hope you’re going to have a good time, sir.”

“The time of my life.”

The spick and span suit-case and the spotless Gladstone were put in the cab, and off he went.

He drove to Victoria, and in a few minutes found himself in Dashley Gardens, ringing the bell for the lift to take him up to his friend’s flat, which was at the top. Three times he rang in succession, but neither lift nor attendant appeared. He turned impatiently to find the hall porter, resplendent in

cap and uniform, observing him complacently from the top of the basement stairs.

"I take it *you* don't run this department?" he inquired, in his airy way.

"No, sir. There's a liftman."

Dixon lifted an eyebrow upwards. "Has the lift murdered the man, or has the man murdered the lift?"

The man, who found his occupation none too lively, was good enough to smile. "I should think that they'd both murdered each other, sir, judging by the noise."

There was a good deal of noise. Laughing and shouting and calling, and a dog barking shrilly. Dixon approximated the sound somewhere from near the top. Suddenly there was a loud clanging and the ropes began to shake. "Good," said Dixon. "Anyway they're bringing down the corpse."

The man advanced a few steps nearer, attracted probably by the infectious gaiety of the young voice. "It's number twenty-six, sir," he vouchsafed confidentially. "She always goes away for the week-end, and there's always the same fuss."

Dixon turned his head, and his keen eyes flashed a glance at the number-board behind him. To his unspeakable satisfaction number twenty-six was the even number at the top. "Number twenty-six is at the top, isn't it?" he said casually to the hall porter.

"Yes, sir."

Dixon's sunny smile shone out on him. "Then we're neighbours, for I'm number twenty-seven."

"Number twenty-seven, sir?" The man's look, more than his words, showed his surprise.

Dixon pulled out the card Carew had given him the night before. "My old friend, Mr Carew, has offered me the use of his flat during his absence. I shall be very little in town during the next four weeks, so that I don't suppose I shall use it much."

"I see, sir." The man's voice was slightly dubious. "Mr Carew didn't mention anything to me about it, sir."

"Then you'd better keep the card as your guarantee for letting me in," said Dixon.

"Thank you, sir, if it's all the same to you. You see, sir, in my place one has to be careful."

"And quite right, too," said Dixon cordially. "It was stupid of me not to have asked Mr Carew to speak to you

personally. I'll tell you what," he said suddenly, "if you have any feeling about letting me into the flat without personal instructions from Mr Carew, if that card is not enough for you, I'll give you Mr Carew's address in Berlin, and you can telegraph for his permission. I'll pay the wire."

The man's face brightened. "That's very good of you, sir. It's very kind of you to take it that way, but you see how I'm placed."

"I quite understand. Is there anyone in the flat now?"

"No, sir."

"Mr Carew told me he had left a charwoman in charge."

"She's not been here to-day, sir."

"Then perhaps you'll be good enough to come upstairs with me and let me into the flat yourself. I'll leave this key with you until you're quite satisfied that you are justified in letting me in. Meantime I'll give you the addresses of two gentlemen in London who will be answerable for me. Either Lord Eastcliffe of 457 Park Lane, or Mr Norman Barrett, the editor of *The Sentinel*, of 389 Finchley Road, will tell you who I am. Sorry to put you to all this trouble." He tipped the man half-a-sovereign as he spoke.

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, sir. I'll come up with you at once, unless you'd rather wait for the lift."

"We'd better wait, then we can take up the bags. The longer he waits the more he'll talk," said Dixon to himself joyfully. "As far as I'm concerned, I wish the lift would stay up there for an hour."

But the lift was not so obliging. Even as the thought crossed his mind, it came down.

Inside was the lift attendant and a prim Englishwoman with "maid" written all over her, with an elegant motor coat in one hand and a jewel-case in the other, a dog basket, some silk cushions and the prettiest girl Dixon had ever beheld.

She was dressed in the height of fashion. In her arms she held a tiny Chinese dog.

"Is the car there?" she asked the hall porter. If she had been pretty when she was silent, she was beautiful when she spoke.

"Yes, madam." He turned to Dixon. "Excuse me one moment, sir." He bustled forward, and busied himself helping the maid and the lift attendant to get out the cushions, the jewel-case and the basket for the dog.

"Is it looks or tips?" Dixon asked himself, observing the little group closely as was his habit. He glanced through the glass doors, which stood open out to the street where the car had drawn up. "She can afford 'em if that's hers."

"Sure we've got everything?" the mistress asked the maid.

"The cushions, the motor coat, the jewel-case and Ting's basket. There now!" the woman exclaimed, going scarlet with vexation, "if we haven't gone and forgotten the hat-box. That's *your* fault!" she declared, turning round to the liftman. "I pointed it out to you the last thing before we came down."

"You didn't do any such thing," cried the attendant indignantly. "If you had, don't you suppose I'd have brought it down?"

"I tell you I *did*," the maid began angrily, when her mistress interposed.

"Oh, you two dear people! What is the good of quarrelling! What does it matter which of you forgot it. It's forgotten. Very well, then it has got to be fetched. You had better go up with him, Danby."

The maid bounced back into the lift, the attendant after her, and the two began wrangling again as to which was in fault, as the lift went up.

The beautiful young woman burst out laughing. "Dear, dear!" she said, addressing no one in particular and yet, in some extraordinary way, including both Mortimer and the hall porter in her remarks. "What a waste of energy, and all over a hat-box!" She lifted the dog to her face caressingly. "We wouldn't worry our head if we had lost the hat, would we, my pet?"

The little animal, delighted at the notice being taken of him, began to bark vociferously and to wriggle violently up and down. "Take care," laughed his mistress, "or I shall drop you." The sound of her pretty laughter excited the little Chow still more. "Take care!" she repeated, "or you will spoil my beautiful blouse. Down, Ting, down."

Her voice rose to a shrill cry as the dog leapt up and slipped backwards out of her gloved hands. In another second the little thing would have been dashed on to the tessellated pavement, when Mortimer Dixon sprang forward and caught it in the nick of time. "He's all right," he said, advancing in his easy, pleasant way.

"Oh, how can I thank you!" The beautiful girl exclaimed rapturously. Then her tones of joy turned to dismay. "My pearls!" she screamed. "My pearls! He's broken the string!"

It was true. Even as she spoke, the second row of her necklet parted, and the jewels fell in a lustrous cascade to the ground. "Oh! stop them rolling! Quick! Quick! Be careful you don't step on them! Oh, *please*, try to help me to find them! Each of them is worth over a hundred pounds."

There are some happily constituted people who in moments of confusion, great or small, invariably keep cool.

Dixon was one of them. He took command of the agitating little situation in exactly the same way as he would have dominated the people around him in the event of a fire. "Stand where you are," he commanded, popping the little creature of the trouble into his basket on the floor. "And hold up your skirt, quick."

The pretty beauty obeyed him instinctively, without asking herself why.

"Now catch the ones left on the string," Dixon ordered her, "and count them as I slip them off. How many are there in all?"

"Twenty-five in the first row and thirty-three in the second."

"Then we've only got to look for ten. Sit down and hold these, and keep your dog quiet, and we'll soon find the rest."

Before she knew what she was doing, the beautiful girl had seated herself on the hall seat, quieted her dog and was counting the pearls in her lap.

"We had better go down on our knees," Dixon said to the hall porter, who stood agape at the masterly way in which the young stranger was ordering them all about. "If we stepped on one of them there wouldn't be much pearl left."

"Oh, do find them! *Please, please* find them for me," wailed the pretty girl plaintively. "It's not only because of their value, but they are an heirloom, and goodness knows what would happen if my grandfather knew they were lost."

"Don't you worry," said Dixon, "we'll find them. I've got four," he called to the hall porter. "How many have you?"

“Two, sir.”

“Then we’ve only got to find another four.”

There was a whizzing of ropes and the lift arrived with a thud.

“Don’t come out!” screamed the girl, waving her hands to keep them back. “Don’t move, don’t stir! you might step on one of my pearls.”

“Pearls, Miss Margaret?”

“Ting jumped up and broke them, and they are all over the place. Naughty darling! If it hadn’t been for that gentleman he might have broken his precious neck.”

“I’d like to wring his precious neck,” muttered the maid viciously. Then she whipped round to the liftman. “You let me out this instant, do you hear. *I’ll* soon find the pearls.”

“I’ve got another,” cried Mortimer Dixon, holding the tiny little gem up triumphantly. “That only leaves three.”

“Oh, give them to me, quick! Give them to me!” screamed the beauty excitedly.

“I sha’n’t do anything of the kind,” he returned, laughing. “With your permission, I’ll give them to your maid instead.” By one of those fortunate little happenings of chance his grovelling had brought him to the maid’s feet as he spoke. He sat back, lifted his blue eyes laughing up at her and held out the pearls. “Five of ’em,” he said. “I’ll deliver them into your keeping. They’ll be much safer with you.”

The sour face above him wreathed itself into one of its rare smiles.

Now Danby was a first-class English maid. She could wash point lace so that it looked as if it had come from the cleaner. She could mend silk stockings so that you would not know they had been torn. She could iron like a French laundress and sew like an Irish nun. She could cook; she could nurse; she could dress hair like a Frenchman; but the only accomplishment on which she set any value at all was her integrity of soul. Dixon’s instant recognition of that quality, which she cherished as fairer women cherish their looks, touched her to the quick. She looked down on the young man at her feet, and as she took the jewels from him she smiled. Once again Mortimer Dixon, by a few light words spoken haphazard, had made a friend—a friend whose loyalty stood him in good part when, on another

summer's day far distant, he grovelled on his knees looking for those same pearls again.

Unconscious of his small triumph, however, he pursued his quest for the remaining three.

The hall porter found one rolled into a corner. Danby, also grovelling, chanced on another tucked away under the mat, but the tenth pearl, the pearl of great price, which completed the necklet, was apparently lost.

They hunted high, they hunted low, they felt with their hands in every cranny and niche. They beat the mat, they shook the dog's cushions, they turned the place upside down, but no pearl was to be found. The hall porter's wife, pressed into the service, brought a soft broom and swept delicately all over the tessellated floor. The liftman ran the lift up a little way and, inserting himself from below, wiped out the entire resting-bed of the lift.

The situation became embarrassing. The spoilt beauty began to cry. The maid began to glare suspiciously at the liftman, and the hall porter, reinforced by his wife, began to wring his hands. Dixon was the only one of the lot who remained perfectly calm and cool.

"The pearl has been dropped," he said quietly. "We haven't stolen it—therefore it is here. If it's here, it's got to be found." A thought suddenly struck him. "Get up and shake yourself," he said, coming up to the beautiful girl. "Not like that! Shake yourself properly! I'll hold the dog." He took the little Chow from her, who, with the unreasoning instinct of animals who know by a touch who loves them, wagged his tail joyously and promptly began to lick his hand. "You know I won't hurt you, old boy, don't you?" With his eyes fixed on the girl shaking her delicate muslins, he gently patted the dog.

"I can't shake any more," whimpered the spoilt beauty despairingly. "I haven't got it."

"But I have," said Dixon quietly. He held up the gleaming pearl, which he had just extricated from the silky hair of the little dog.

"Oh! how shall I ever thank you!" The excited girl caught hold of his outstretched hand. "First you saved my darling Ting's life, and now you've saved my pearls! You're an angel from heaven! Do tell me your name and address, and my aunt will send you a card."

"She won't have to send far then," Dixon smiled down

into the beautiful face upturned to his, "for the next two or three weeks I'm going to live in the flat at the top of this house, next door to yours."

"Mr Carew's flat! You don't mean to say you know Reggie Carew?"

"He's one of my best pals."

"Then I know who *you* are!" she cried delightedly. "You are Mortimer Dixon! I'm sure of it. Now, aren't you?"

"So my godfathers and godmothers called me in my baptism."

"How perfectly enchanting!" cried the girl. "Reggie has spoken to me about you so often that I have been simply dying to know you. But though I begged him to bring you to see us, he always said it was no good—you never would go anywhere, because you were always working so hard. But you will come to see me now, won't you?" she pleaded.

"Indeed I will." He found himself staring down into the lovely, upturned eyes with a good deal more satisfaction than his conscience approved. He pulled himself up very sharp. "I'll be delighted to call on you and your aunt, Miss——"

"My name's Margaret Dalrymple."

"A little later, Miss Dalrymple. At present I'm working as hard as I know, for, you see"—his face changed as it always did when he thought of the Plump Little Party—"I'm going to be married next month."

"Oh, are you?" A little shadow of regret dimmed the brilliance of the beautiful eyes. "Then you must bring your *fiancée* to call on us at the same time—but you *must* come or I shall never forgive you. You must come and dine with us one night, and as we are going to be such near neighbours, if there is anything we can do to be of use, just pop across and tell us. Don't forget, will you?"

"Thanks; I'll be sure to remember." He took the elegant, white-gloved little hand in his, and gave it a friendly squeeze.

"No wonder you found my pearls if you are Mortimer Dixon," she said, laughing up at him. "Mr Carew says you are the most, extraordinary person, always doing the most wonderful things. It's so funny my meeting you like this, isn't it?" she added naively. "I noticed you the minute I set eyes on you, and wondered who you were."

As she took her way down the steps and got into the car with her maid, her chauffeur and her dog, all a-flutter with her ribbons and laces, Dixon told himself she was the daintiest thing in the way of womanhood he had ever seen before.

"It's a good thing I'm as good as a married man," he said to the hall porter, who stood beside him, watching the car drive away. "If I saw much of *that*, it strikes me I should be grovelling on my knees for something that's worth considerably more than pearls."

"She is a beauty, isn't she, sir?" said the hall porter sympathetically. "But I don't find marriage much of a support! I've had four in my time. Divorced one, buried two, and I'm as bad as ever! Put me within a mile of a pretty woman, and though I'm close on fifty, and the father of seven, off goes my old heart on the hop."

"We're a bad lot, aren't we?" said Dixon absently. The magic of a certain dear little face under its hat trimmed with roses was upon him again, and he was not best pleased with himself. Then he overflowed as usual. "Lucky those of us who find the right one who can keep us straight, first go-off."

"I'm thinking you'll be one of them, sir," said the hall porter.

The attractive young face looked strangely stern as he answered: "Please God I am."

The two men lingered a minute longer, watching the busy streets and the busy people, each occupied with his own thoughts. Then, by a common impulse, they both turned to the bags. "Would you like to go up now, sir?"

"If you're free."

"Right, sir." He motioned to the liftman and the three of them ascended to the top.

"It's the sixth storey, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

The lift stopped; the man lifted out the bags, and the porter motioned Dixon forward to the right-hand door.

"Here's the key," said Dixon, producing it.

The man shook his head. "I have got one on me, sir; I've a duplicate key to all the flats in this block, and I always make a point of keeping 'em handy, the tenants so often mislay theirs when they get back and want 'em in a hurry."

"How many keys are there to this flat?" Dixon asked, apparently idly.

“Three, sir : this one of Mr Carew’s which you’ve got, his charwoman’s and my own duplicate key.” He inserted it into the lock as he spoke and opened the door. “After you, sir.” He held back.

Mortimer Dixon went in.

CHAPTER IX

A GREAT modern writer has said that each house has its own character and history, and bears the traces of both written upon it for those who have eyes to see. He goes even further and declares that the impress left by the tenants on a house is so strong that, if it is entered by, what is termed in psychological parlance, “a sensitive,” it can actually be felt. Notably, he adds, this is most strongly the case in houses which have witnessed disgrace and sorrow, and where there has been enacted any tragedy of sin and crime.

As has been said elsewhere, Mortimer Dixon was misleading as far as appearances go. The word “sensitive” naturally conjures up a vision of leanness and pallor, of dreamy eyes and long hair. In every particular he was just the reverse. He was tall, he was square-shouldered. He was built on such strong lines that, young as he was, he was almost robust. With his clear skin, and his bright eyes, and his close-cropped head, and his well-made clothes, he was the very antithesis of what would be looked for in one strongly endowed with psychic gifts. For all that he was a “sensitive” of the rarest type.

When he saw people for the first time, the instant he set eyes on them, he always knew at a glance whether he liked them or not ; and he never departed from his first impression. A handshake—a thing which passes unnoticed by most people—held for him a world of secret meaning. Give him a letter to read from a stranger, and ask his opinion either of the contents or the writer, and he would sit and finger the paper almost as if he could “sense” with the tips of his fingers the character of the one who had left his mark—in a literal sense of the word—on the sheet of notepaper when he wrote.

As it was with people, so it was with inanimate things. It would often happen, naturally, that his calling would take

him almost daily into fresh surroundings in the pursuit of his work.

It was indeed one of his favourite amusements when sent to interview a notability, to get to the place where he was sent a few minutes before the actual time of his appointment, so that he might, at his leisure, create for himself an idea of the person he was about to see, from the atmosphere in which he lived. To the boys at the office, who chaffed him unmercifully about these little ways of his, he used to turn it off in his airy manner as a joke; but to himself it was one of the most important side-issues of his future career. "For I am going to have a career," he would say to himself, setting his jaw squarely, "and the best way to get it, is to have a great knowledge of men. Some of these days, this little amusement of mine, of making up my mind what people are from what I imagine them to be, will help me perhaps at the most critical moment of my life. A judgment of people is as great a gift, and as much a gift, as playing the piano, or painting, or acting, or going in for a business career. I have this gift. I know it. This is my way of educating this gift I have."

In pursuance of this idea, he usually made a practice of trying to reduce his mind to a blank before he went into a house for the first time. "It should be like a photographer's highly sensitised plate," he once said when expounding his views, "prepared to the highest point of its receptive possibility, and purged of all thought."

On this particular occasion, however, his mind was neither actively blank to receive an impression, nor was it purged of thought. His whole mentality, indeed, was enjoyably occupied with the charming details of the little incident which had just occurred—the beautiful girl, her pearls and her little dog. He had asked the question about the keys of the flat in the perfunctory manner in which a first-class physician asks a patient who is on the highroad to recovery if he has slept well, when his whole soul is concentrating itself on the thoughts of another patient whose life is at stake. He puts the question because long years of training have made it second nature for it to come spontaneously to his lips.

So it was with Dixon. In some subconscious strata of thought he knew it was necessary for him to inquire how many keys there were. So, with his thoughts quite away

from the subject, he inquired. It was the same with the answer. He registered—again in some subconscious strata of thought—the fact that there were three keys, of which he possessed one; but his whole impassioned mental activity was concentrated on what breed the little Chow belonged to, where his mistress had got him, and whether she spoke the truth when she said that each pearl was worth over a hundred pounds.

With all these insignificant little trifles revolving in his mind, he gaily stepped into Carew's flat.

The instant his foot was well over the threshold he stood stock-still in the hall, as if he had received an electric shock. As though he had been struck by lightning, everything went out of his mind as if it had been wiped off the surface with a sponge. The girl, the dog, the pearls, even the beautiful memory of the park and the girl he loved, went from him as though they had never existed. Without conscious effort, his mind purged itself of every sensation of thought.

He stood in the square entrance hall of the flat, looking down the dim corridor to where it merged into a lounge, furnished like a room. It was flooded with light, and that look of spiritual exultation, which was the outward and visible sign of that inward consuming fire, which men call genius, came into his eyes. As in a dream, the voice of the hall porter and the lift attendant came to him as they handled his bags; the slamming of the lift door, and the creaking of the lift as it descended, the man's steps following him into the flat, did not even distract him, so possessed was he in absorbing the atmosphere of the place where he stood. Even the clicking of the flat door, combined with the knowledge that the hall porter stood behind him, was not strong enough to induce him to move.

"The rooms are all open, sir, if you wish to go in."

Dixon did not even turn his head. He just stood there and, like a tangible thing, strong, incomprehensible, yet overwhelming in its unseen power, the sensation of sorrow and suffering, of crime and of death, fell upon him, obliterating every petty convention and blotting out, with its horror, even the gay sunshine of that summer afternoon.

"Something horrible has happened here." The obsession under which he had fallen formed itself mechanically into words in his brain. "Or something horrible is going to happen. I wonder which!"

"Anything wrong, sir?" The hall porter, voicing Dixon's own thought, brought him back to himself. It was no part of his game to let anyone but himself know what he was thinking. He had no desire to be laughed at if he was wrong. He had still less desire to give away his premonition of evil if he was right. He turned to the man in his own easy way. "Hallo," he said, "are you there? I can hardly see, coming into the dark out of that blinding light."

"It is a bit dark, sir. It's the doors being all shut. When they're open you can see right enough."

"The panels ought to be made of glass," said Dixon, uttering the first words that came into his head. Great as was his self-control, he could not entirely shake off that extraordinary sensation all at once.

"They tried it, sir, but the tenants don't seem to fancy them." As he spoke, the man threw open two of the doors on the right. "The dining-room, sir, and Mr Carew's study." He paused, looking expectantly at Dixon, who instantly perceived him to be one of those underlings who identify themselves with their employers' positions and, even at second hand, savour praise.

"Ah," he said, glancing into the room, "Sheraton, I see. Quite charming! I suppose Mr Carew put in that ceiling himself?"

"No, sir. The gentleman before him. He was a most artistic gentleman, sir, and had plenty of money to gratify his tastes." He stopped short and looked at Dixon as if he were on the point of saying something more, but decided not, on second thoughts. "It's the ceiling what lets the flat, sir. All the other tenants are mad to have one like it; but they won't put it in themselves, and, of course, the landlord won't run to the expense."

"Charming. Mr Carew's in luck." Dixon glanced through the second door. "That's a cosy little den if you like."

The man laughed. "That's the second-best bedroom in most of the flats, sir, where there are several members of the family; but, of course, Mr Carew being a single man—Wait till you see the dining-room, sir."

Dixon followed him down the passage, the sensation of unrest growing stronger and stronger at every step he took, until they came to the drawing-room, and the man threw the door open.

So utterly different was it from what he had expected, that he entered with a cry of delighted surprise.

"You might search London over and not find a room like that in a flat, sir," said the hall porter.

"Indeed you might," Dixon agreed heartily, and the man was right.

The room was entirely delightful—nobly proportioned, with a bow window looking out on to a balcony, with elegantly panelled walls of stretched pink silk. The colour scheme of the room was champagne, but pink silk cushions lay in the gilt chairs and on the gilt sofa of Empire design, and the brocade with which they were upholstered, in a design of true lover's knots and clusters of roses, was also pink.

Roses predominated. There were cut roses in crystal vases, growing roses in the gold jardiniere, and bushes of the same exquisite flowers in the tubs and window-boxes outside. Rose-pink silk curtains draped the windows, and their sheeny folds deepened to lines of exquisite colour as they fell festooning over the inner blinds of cream net and lace. Dixon sighed for pure pleasure. It was the happiest combination of luxury and comfort that could possibly be desired. It hit that rarest of happy mediums, the line which divides the commonplace from the stiff, un-lived-in beauty of a model room at a furniture dealer's shop.

He stood and looked at it, appraising each elegant trifle with the skilled appreciation of the connoisseur. If he had had carte blanche to create for himself a room after his own heart, just such a room as this would he have designed. Yet no thought of envy of his friend's gifts of material fortune crossed his mind. He was made of too good stuff to envy a man his table and chairs.

Still smiling, he stepped through the open French windows on to the balcony, and regarded the outlook of bright green grass and the sun glittering on the housetops, transmuted them with its magic touch into dwellings of fairy gold. Then a sudden thought struck him, and he turned to the hall porter, who had come out too. "Awkward if there were a fire?"

The man shook his head, smiling. "Not so awkward as you might think, sir. If you will look this way, sir."

Dixon's eyes followed his pointing finger. An iron staircase of fair dimensions, a connecting link between the two,

took its circular way from the height at which they stood to the ground.

"Not so dusty for the gay burglar, eh, what?" said Dixon, as usual speaking the first thoughts that came into his head. "Ever had one?"

The queer little look that had appeared in the man's eye when Dixon first spoke to him came to life again. "No, sir; and, what's more, we don't want one. There wouldn't be half as many as you hear tell of, if hall porters would look after their places a bit better. I've been here fifteen years come November and never a thing missing since I set foot in the place."

"I'd be sorry for one if *you* got hold of him," said Dixon, in his pleasant way. "You have got a chest on you under that coat of yours. Army, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Guardsman, or I'm a Dutchman."

"Yes, sir." He looked at Mortimer Dixon with the naïve surprise of a child. "However did you guess, sir?"

Dixon laughed. "You give yourself away, my good man, at every step you take. There's no mistaking *that* walk."

The man beamed all over his face with delight. "Just to think of your noticing that, sir."

"There's not much that I don't notice," Dixon replied calmly. "It's my trade."

"There now," said the hall porter, "I knew you was an artist the minute I set eyes on you."

"How did you guess that?"

"Something about you, sir. A look in your eye, I think. They all 'ave it, sir. Bright, and yet kind of dreamy-like. I says to myself, when you stood there in the corridor outside just now, he's making a picture of that in his head, I'll be bound. Am I right, sir?"

"Quite right." The sensation of dread which had lifted from Dixon like a cloud lifts before the sun, when he entered the beautiful apartment full of colour and light, gripped him by the throat again. "Show me the other rooms, will you?"

"Certainly, sir. This way, sir."

Dixon turned and followed him through the window, and his eyes, attracted to the mantelpiece, saw with surprise that, in the carved white wood of the overmantel, the painted

portrait impanelled in the centre was the portrait of the beautiful girl whose pearls he had saved. "The lady of the pearls, eh," he said to himself softly.

But the porter overheard him. "It is a removable panel," he said dryly, "which, seeing it ain't always the same face with Mr Carew, is rather a good thing."

Dixon smiled idly without speaking. At the sight of that gay, *riante* face, his heart seemed to lighten. "It's a good omen," he said to himself, and the fire of his calling rushed back on him consumingly. "I found your pearls for you, my lady, when I came in, and I'll find out what I've come to look for before I go out."

He followed the hall porter out of the room.

The door of the best bedroom, which Dixon was to occupy, lay exactly opposite the drawing-room door. Again it was a charming apartment, furnished with the same judicious commingling of wealth and taste as the other rooms. The bed, with its canopy of lace curtains, lace-trimmed pillows and Renaissance lace counterpane, together with the costly and elegant appointments of the dressing-table, seemed to his fancy to be almost unsuitable for a plain man's room. "Mr Carew does himself pretty well," he said to the hall porter.

"Lor' bless you, sir," said the man, grinning, "this ain't Mr Carew's furnishing; he took the place over just as it was."

"Oh, did he? I understood he'd got it on lease."

"So he has, sir."

"And you mean to say that the woman who had this place before let furniture like this go to a stranger?"

"I never said the former tenant was a lady, sir."

"But these things do," said Dixon, laying his hand on the lace counterpane. "My friend, there are some things in this world which speak louder than words."

The man stared at him and said nothing.

"Wasn't it a woman?"

"It was furnished for a lady, sir."

As was the way with him, Dixon jumped at his conclusion. "The gentleman was going to be married and furnished it, and the lady died."

"No, sir. The lady didn't die."

"Then it was the gentleman!" Dixon looked round at the exquisite room, and his ready sympathy, answering the

call of his imagination, showed itself in his face. "Poor chap!"

The hall porter's face took on its surly look. "Yes, sir, the gentleman died. You'll excuse me, sir, but I'm no holder of talking about other tenants' affairs." His manner was abrupt, almost discourteous, but Dixon understood.

"And quite right, too. It was stupid of me to seem to question you, but these histories of men and women always interest me so deeply. You see, I'm an artist in words, not in colours. I write. That's why I ask questions. Not because I'm curious, but just because it's part of my very work. You must forgive me."

There was no resisting him when he spoke in that kind of way. The hall porter instantly succumbed. "It's for you to forgive me, sir," he said cordially, "for snapping you up like that; but the truth of it is, sir"—he looked over his shoulder and dropped his voice—"you see there was something wrong with the last tenant of this flat."

"I knew it!" The words jumped to Mortimer Dixon's lips, but he checked himself in time. "Indeed," he said, and he wondered if the man heard the eagerness in his voice as he heard it himself. "Money troubles, eh?"

"Worse than that, sir." Again the man looked over his shoulder and came a step nearer. "Suicide, sir. The lady, she gave him the chuck, sir, and he killed hisself."

"Good God! what a horrible thing."

"You'd have said so, sir, if you'd have seen him. He was a quiet sort of gentleman, kept hisself to hisself, never a word to nobody, so we didn't miss him for a day or two. It was a little later in the year than this, sir. He'd a manservant of his own and a char in by the day to do the work—the self-same char that Mr Carew has now, sir."

A look that was almost like a tiger's sprang into Dixon's eyes. To hide his agitation he took out a cigarette and, stepping into the study, he took the matches off the writing-table to light it with. The porter stood still at the open door.

"How was it the charwoman didn't tell you of it?"

"She was away, sir, as chance would 'ave it. He'd given her a week off before his wedding. Parcels and letters kept coming for him, but I didn't give no heed to it. I thought he was just spending the week-end with his young lady, who lived up the river, same as he often did. Then, suddenly,

she began telephoning, ringing up and ringing up, till at last I says to my missus, 'I think I'd better go in and see if number twenty-seven's all right.' "

Dixon's teeth clenched so hard on his cigarette that the end of it came off in his mouth.

"As I was telling you just now, sir, I've got a duplicate key to all the flats. I let myself in and stood here, as I might be standing now, and I coughed like this, sir, thinking he might be in and answer me. Then, as there was no answer, I called out, 'Mr Warrington, are you there, sir?' and somehow, sir, just as the words came out of my mouth, a queer kind of feeling seemed to come over me like, and I knew as well as if I'd been told that something was up. I pushed open this door, sir; the blinds were all down, and the curtains were drawn, and the room—you can see for yourself, sir, it's none too light at the best of times—was pitch dark. I went over to draw the curtains, and I trod on something, sir—something soft. *It was his poor face, sir.*"

The man stopped short abruptly. Even at the mere remembrance of it the sweat was pouring down his face.

"Gave you a bad shake, eh?" said Dixon sympathetically.

"You may well say so, sir. I went through the war, and didn't turn a hair. I'm used to seeing dead folk. I've been through one or two accidents myself. But when I saw him there, sir, it fair turned me up." He looked down at the carpet at his feet and shuddered.

Dixon, his keen imagination reconstructing the tragedy, looked down and found himself shuddering too.

"Did you find out why he did it?"

"No, sir; there was a deal of talk at the time, but it was all 'ushed up. There was plenty of money going, and influence, and mum's the word, sir. They just sat on him, and buried him, and there was an end of it. A pile of money he left too, poor gentleman, every penny of it to 'er, sir. He left all this stuff to 'er, too, sir, but of course she wouldn't look at it. Glad enough she was to get rid of it to Mr Carew."

"I wonder Mr Carew took it, knowing what happened," said Dixon.

The hall porter smiled grimly. "Bless your heart, sir, 'e didn't know what'd happened. There's lots of things goes on in London that nobody knows of. Queer things too,

a deal queerer than the stuff they puts in the books and papers. There ain't much you can't do in London, sir, if you've got the oof and know 'ow to keep your mouth shut." He looked into Dixon's face meaningly. "I am thinking you are one of them that can, sir."

"I am."

"You can generally tell, sir. I don't know what made me bring it up, but some'ow just standing here with you talking like this, on the very spot, as it were, brought it all fresh back to me."

He put up his clean, coarse hand and wiped the perspiration from his face. "Of course you won't say a word of this to Mr Carew, sir?"

"Don't you worry yourself. I sha'n't say a word. And don't you go thinking about it either," he added, laying his hand on the man's shoulder in his friendly way, "or you'll be upsetting yourself again. Come, show me the rooms."

Together they went through the remaining rooms of the flat. A pretty second bedroom, daintily furnished; an immaculate kitchen and a model of the up-to-date bathroom brought them to a baize door. "Servants' quarters and kitchen, sir," the man said, pausing—"would you like to see them too?"

"I would like to see everything," Dixon answered him, with an enthusiasm which the porter put down to his delight in the pretty place, but which, in reality, was only the opening move in the great game of life and death which he was about to play.

"This way, sir."

He pushed open the baize door, disclosing a small passage lined with cupboards which led to a little self-contained flat of a kitchen and two rooms.

Dixon looked at the shining rows of copper saucepans, and his thoughts went to Brixton to the little girl who, if he knew anything about it, would very soon have a row of shining copper saucepans of her own. Then he went into the servants' bedroom. It was a fair-sized room with two beds, well furnished and well kept. His passion for detail noted approvingly the running hot and cold water, then his eye travelled to the dressing-table. On it there lay a dirty black hairbrush with half the bristles out, and a small broken piece of comb. His fastidious sense revolted at the idea of his food being served by a woman who used a brush like that.

He turned away abruptly. "Is this another servant's bedroom?" He paused at another door.

"No, sir, the boxroom." The porter turned the handle as he spoke and shook his head. "Afraid you can't see this, sir; it's locked."

"Let it stay locked for all I care. There's plenty of room in the bedroom for my bags."

"I'd better open them for you, sir, before I go down."

Dixon laughed. "Hadn't you better telephone first to see if I'm respectable?"

The man, already on his knees unstrapping the Gladstone, grinned up in Dixon's face. "I'll take my chance of that, sir. I was orderly to my colonel, so I'm used to valeting."

Dixon threw him his keys. "Good; then you can valet me. If there's one thing I abominate, it's putting the links in my shirt-cuffs myself. Let me know when you go, will you?"

He left the man unpacking his suit-case and went into the drawing-room. It was the only room in the house in which he felt no sense of oppression.

"Funny old jossers, English architects!" he said to himself, looking over at the iron railings of the outside stair-case. "If I were one of the light-fingered fraternity I should certainly visit these flats, make love to the maid-servant, get a duplicate key, walk in at the front door, take whatever I wanted, walk out through the French windows and down those steps at the back."

At that moment he remembered what the girl with the pearls had said to him in the hall, that her flat was on the same floor as Carew's. "That's her drawing-room or I'm a Dutchman!" One did not need to be a Sherlock Holmes to guess that. The flower-boxes and the curtains were quite as elegant as, and even more distinctive than, Carew's.

"I've put your things away in the wardrobe, sir, and I've laid out your things for to-night."

"I'm greatly obliged for all your attention," said Dixon. "I'm dining out to-night. If there's anything more I want I'll let you know."

"Very good, sir. I don't go off duty till ten."

The porter touched his cap and departed.

Dixon was alone in the flat.

CHAPTER X

As Dixon shut the door on the porter the same sickening sense of oppression seized him again. It was, if anything, worse than when he had first gone in ; then he had the man for company, now he was alone.

For a moment he hesitated, then he resolutely opened the door into the fatal room. For over half-an-hour he must have stood there motionless, trying with all the strength in him to turn his active brain into a perfect blank. In a general way he was able to accomplish this none-too-easy task at will ; but on that afternoon it was useless. Thought after thought obtruded itself on him, try as he would to keep them out. For once in his life he found himself in the grip of an emotion which he was powerless to control. His mind, far from being the perfect blank he desired, was a chaotic plane on which, juggling and jostling with each other, a phantasmagoria of chars and Chinks, coffins and dogs, whirled round a gigantic figure which towered above them all—a man with the life-blood ebbing from his throat, a sinister figure which leapt and raved, calling to Mortimer Dixon a warning or a prophecy, as if the aura of that poor devil's agony, when he was driven so hard that there was no way out for him but to take his own life—still lingered, impalpable but potent, in the air.

“ Is it what he suffered here, and the hideous tragedy which took place, that permeates the spiritual atmosphere of this room, filling me with this sense of restlessness and dread ? ” Dixon asked himself—“ or is it a premonition, a presentiment of something horrible which is yet to come ? ” He stood there, frowning, his eyes aglow, as if they burned with the fire of his seeking to disinter the past and unveil the future. Anyone apt at similes would have likened him to a blood-hound standing at cross-roads, vainly endeavouring to identify his course by a baffling scent.

“ I must be a pretty good old proposition in the Ass line!” he said aloud suddenly. “ There's a something here which I can't get at. I feel it, yet I can't get in touch with it. If I put it into plain English to anyone else, he would tell me I was a madman. But I'm not. I may find it or I may not find it, but whether I do or whether I don't, it's there all the same.”

If there was one thing more than another Dixon hated, it was any kind of indecision. He was essentially a man of action. As long as there was something tangible that he could get hold of, and start out to do, he was all right. There was no one in Fleet Street to compare with him, when it came to that kind of chase. But when it was a question of determining his own line of action, or, rather, when he was thrust into a position of having first to find out what he was looking for, and then look for it, he was at a momentary loss. Yet, curiously enough, as though a malignant Fate was told off to look after him when he set out on a new adventure—each time that some really great piece of work had fallen to his share—in the first instance he generally had nothing to go upon but his own queer *flair*.

If he had only been able to see into the future, he would have blessed the Fate which sent him these horrible hours of self-distrust, for they made him search his heart and find out his own weakness. By the light of those first hours of failure he was unconsciously teaching himself to read the first lesson in the great book of Success—patience, self-control, mercy for the failures of others, humility when, with the prize in his own hand, he looked back and saw how easily he might have failed.

That, above all, was the lesson hard for him to learn. So thoroughly had he rubbed it into himself that, though to fail was human, to give in was contemptible, when he had once taken up the unravelling of a mystery he found to his astonishment that, even though he wanted to, as long as it remained unsolved he could not put it down.

Just then the clock struck six. He gave a nod of satisfaction. "It's early yet. I'll go down and see the chief."

Straightway into the bathroom he went, and turned on the taps. Into the bedroom he went and got a pair of silk socks. Into his suit-case he dived and got out his razors. He shaved twice a day as a matter of course.

When it came to his hair, however, to his dismay he found that he had no brush. He looked on the dressing-table, he looked in his suit-case, he looked in his bag. Not a sign of such a thing anywhere! Like so many people who pride themselves on their packing, he brought a dozen things he probably would not require, and had forgotten one of the first necessities of life.

He looked in the glass and grinned at himself. As was his

custom, when he took a bath, he had washed his head. His close-cropped curls, still wet, stood on end. It was impossible to go out like that.

The thought of the dirty black comb on the servants' chest of drawers occurred to him. He shuddered at the thought of applying such a dubious article to his spotless head. The hall porter's would most likely be only a degree less objectionable. What the devil was he to do?

It occurred to him suddenly that Carew—luxurious beggar that he was—had probably more than one set of such things.

"Doubtless his ladyloves have showered them on his head by the dozen," he said to himself grimly. "Ivory and silver and tortoiseshell and—since he had been to New York—of gold, yea, probably of much fine gold!"

Now, as has been said before, according to the hall porter, the bedroom had been designed for a woman. Consequently the dressing-table was essentially a woman's piece of furniture and had about a dozen drawers.

He began rummaging in the dressing-table drawers with the happy freemasonry of his kind.

Silk ties, safety razors, handkerchiefs, scent, discarded buttonholes, silk socks, gold studs, tieclips—everything that the heart of a man could desire, even down to a broken relic of a past romance—a lace, hand-painted fan. But a brush! Not a sign of one—not even a comb.

"I suppose I'll have to wash the old girl's beastly thing and use it," he said to himself disgustedly. "It's the only thing to do."

He banged into the servants' bedroom, and was gingerly approaching the fragment of comb when a little white brushbag hanging from the drawer handle caught his eye.

Its suggestion of cleanliness was so great that he pulled the strings open and looked in.

Inside was a small brush with a white handle. He took it out and looked at it in amazement. It was as spotless as his own.

"Gollypots! that's queer!" he said to himself, turning it over—"and real ivory too! S'pose the comb's for herself, and the brush is for company!" Then his face changed, and, drawing aside the curtain, he held the brush up to the light, examining it still more closely.

Entwined in its soft, white bristles was a long black hair.

Delicately he disentangled it, until it lay like a thread of silk, coiling in the palm of his hand.

It was fine; it was glossy; it was black. The person to whom it belonged—judging from its length and quality—must have a remarkably fine head of hair.

He laid it carefully down on the chest of drawers and pursued his investigations a little farther inside the bag. At first he thought it was empty, but at the bottom lay a little tiny glass bottle. He took it out and looked at it.

It was a curious little bottle. It was thick. It was narrow. It was long. Down the centre a little piece of flecky gold zigzagged its tortuous way. It had a glass stopper instead of a cork. Dixon removed the stopper. The liquid inside was a bright, hard green. He touched it with the tip of his finger and smelt it delicately, and his face changed again.

For a long time the young journalist stood there, looking, first at the little bottle in his hand, and then at the long black hair. Anyone watching him could have seen the perplexed trouble in his face. He looked like a child who had been set a hard sum to do and did not know the way.

At last, with a sigh of satisfaction, he dropped the little bottle back into the bag. He took up the brush and looked at it again. Then he dropped that, too, back into the little bag. Apparently he could not make up his mind to use it, spotless though it might be. He went back into Carew's bedroom and finished dressing, leaving his hair as it was.

Then he telephoned to the Plump Little Party to wish her good-night.

"Get safe home, darling? Good. I'm just off to see the chief. I don't know what I'm going to do after that. Be a good child and go to sleep early. I'll ring you up to-morrow as soon as I can. Good-night, darling."

He hung up the receiver and went downstairs.

The hall porter came towards him with a letter in his hand. "A letter for you, sir."

Dixon took it and glanced at it absently. The handwriting, which was unfamiliar to him, was remarkably characteristic and strong.

"I don't know when I shall be back," he said to the hall porter, "but on the off-chance, as Mr Carew's char does not appear to be forthcoming, I shall be much obliged if your wife will go up and make my bed."

“ Very good, sir.”

“ I suppose there is a night porter ? ”

“ No, sir ; but the lights are left on.”

“ Right-o. Good-night.”

“ Good-night to you, sir.”

During this conversation Dixon had kept the letter in his hand unopened, “ sensing ” it in his own queer way. He always did that with letters from strangers. It was part of his plan for training those psychic powers of his. The idea was first put into his head at a drawing-room séance given by a friend, where a psychometrist told the fortunes and the characters of the audience by simply “ sensing ” articles taken from their persons, in just the same way.

“ A man wrote this letter,” Dixon said to himself, fingering the envelope as he turned it in his hand. “ He is strong. He is weak. He is something out of the usual run. He is clever. He is original . . . and I don’t know a damn thing about him ! ” He laughed at himself for a fanciful idiot as he tore open the envelope.

Inside was a common sheet of paper with a five-shilling postal order pinned on the top. Beneath was scrawled :

“ Your man’s alive and kicking. You owe me tuppence for the order and the stamp.”

It was signed Dunston Fletcher, and a postscript was added.

“ You didn’t ask my name yesterday. Damn good thing I asked yours ! ”

Dixon went as white as if you had struck him. Every vestige of colour seemed to die out of his face and to concentrate itself in his eyes. They positively blazed with excitement and the pupils dilated until there was no blue left.

“ Not bad news, I hope, sir ? ” the hall porter, who had been watching him, inquired sympathetically.

“ I don’t know,” Dixon answered him abruptly. “ It may be bad. It may be good. Where’s the nearest barber’s shop ? ”

The man directed him and, holding the door open for him to pass out, watched him running down the steps.

“ ’E’s a queer customer, ’e is, if ever I see one,” the man told himself. “ That’s the way ’e looked when ’e first went into the flat. ’E’s as sharp as you make ’em, but

'e's queer ; no doubt about it, 'e's queer ! I wonder wot's the matter with 'im ! P'raps the pore chap has fits ! ”

Meantime the “ pore chap ” had his hair brushed and dressed till there was not even a “ kink ” left of his curls. Then he swung himself to the top of a motor, and in less than twenty minutes an office boy was scurrying up the stairs with his name.

In another minute the boy came flying down again. “ The chief'll see you at once, Mr Dixon. ”

Mortimer Dixon did not wait for the lift, but went up the stairs four steps at a time.

In the great room lined with books, writing at a table in the window, sat the editor. By his side stood his secretary with a bundle of papers in his hand. So strict was the discipline maintained by the great man who ran the paper that the two young men, though the best of comrades, did not even exchange a word. The chief finished his writing leisurely, took an envelope from the despatch-box in front of him, folded the paper, put it into the envelope and addressed it with a deliberation which seemed to Dixon's mind so great as to be forced.

“ He's dying to know what I've got to say, and doesn't want me to guess it, ” he said to himself. “ Good. ”

With the same deliberation the chief stuck down the envelope, and put on the stamp. “ Post that yourself, Stephens, ” he said to his secretary.

“ Very good, sir. ”

“ That's all. You needn't wait. ”

The secretary disappeared, and the chief turned to Dixon.

“ Well, Mr Dixon ? ”

Dixon was still standing. It was one of the grievances of the staff that by a rule, never infringed upon within the knowledge of man, no one connected with the paper was ever asked to sit down.

“ Well, Mr Dixon, ” said the great man deliberately, turning towards him, “ what have you got to report ? ”

Before he had time to answer, the inner door of the editor's room opened, and the man whom Dixon worshipped with the fervour of a devotee for his patron saint entered the room.

“ So *that's* why he was so slow with his stamps and his lickings, ” Dixon said to himself. “ *He* wants to hear what I've done. So it *is* a big thing after all ! ”

The mysterious effect which that extraordinary personality always had on Mortimer Dixon acted on this occasion so overwhelmingly that the mere knowledge of his presence stirred his blood as though he had been drinking champagne. He was at his very best, as he stood there with the sunlight turning his close-cropped curls to gold—his blue eyes sparkling with excitement—and told his tale. He had not an idea of what he was going to say when he started talking, but it was a little masterpiece of descriptive eloquence all the same. Not a word too much ; not a word too little ; just a simple statement of facts, touched here and there with the little dashes of imagination which were peculiarly his own, and make the difference between a brilliant piece of verbal journalism and a mere report.

When he stopped talking there was a pause.

The lesser man, great though his position was, dismissed it as the pleasing effort of a young and versatile writer. The master-mind in the background adjudged it correctly as the unmistakable evidence of a fellow master-mind.

“ Is that all ? ” said the editor, looking at Dixon over his glasses in his unmoved and sceptical way.

“ That’s all, sir.”

“ It’s not much, Mr Dixon.”

Dixon stood quite still and made no reply.

“ It’s one of those things which seem to promise well, and then fizzle out. I’m disappointed.”

Again Dixon made no reply.

“ You say you didn’t even get any pictures ? ”

“ No, sir.”

“ Why not ? Mackenzie went down with you, didn’t he ? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Then why didn’t he take them.”

“ It was my fault that he didn’t, sir.” Prompt as the reply came, there was the fraction of a moment’s hesitation. The man watching in the background noted it for future use.

“ How your fault, Mr Dixon ? ”

“ In this kind of chase, as you know, sir, etiquette demands that the photographer takes his instructions from the reporter in charge. Had I told Mackenzie to take the photographs, he would have done so, of course.”

“ But you didn’t ? ”

"No, sir."

"And why not, pray?" The sharp eyes over his glasses flashed ominously.

"I thought it premature, sir."

"No hesitation that time," thought the man in the background, "though he is risking his place."

The editor of the paper slapped his hand sharply on the table. "You thought it premature, Mr Dixon! I'd have you understand that, in this office, reporters are paid to carry out my instructions—not to think. When I want your opinion as to my course of action I will ask for it. Until then, be good enough not to interfere."

"Very good, sir."

"To-morrow you will return to Whitechapel and interview the Chinaman. Mackenzie will go with you and take photographs of the laundry, the courtyard, the coffin—if it is, as you say, a coffin—and the man himself. It will be a good page for *The Daily Looking-Glass*, even if it is of no use to us."

"Very good, sir."

"Get out a few statistics about laundry work and Chinamen's wages, and send in about a thousand words. That is all there is to do. As for the girl, she probably ran away from home on account of this love affair you speak about. There is nothing in it. While we are about it, Mr Dixon, one word of warning. You are a young man of good abilities and much promise. I am the first to acknowledge both promise and ability in my young men. You have advanced very rapidly for a man of your age. Do not presume on it. Always bear in mind, though you yourself may be very clever, there are plenty of young men in Fleet Street quite as clever as you. That is all, Mr Dixon, thank you. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir. Good-night, my lord."

Mortimer Dixon bowed to the two men with the easy grace natural to him, and quietly walked out of the room.

"An excellent manner," the great man in the background said to himself. Aloud he said: "You're a bit rough on the youngster, aren't you?"

"Not half as rough as I would like to have been," snapped the editor. "That boy ought to do great things if he doesn't get a swollen head. He thought it 'premature' to take photographs. Did you hear him say that?"

"I heard him."

"Pretty cool cheek, eh, saying it to my face?"

"The others would have said it behind your back."

"That's the worst of Dixon. He's so jolly cocksure of himself that he gets on my nerves. It's that imagination of his that runs away with him. I dare say if we could look inside his head we should find all kinds of fantastic theories about this Chinaman and his coffin."

"I dare say we should."

"Anyway it's not what *we're* after, worse luck! I wish to God it were! Those Embassy people worry the life out of me about the thing. It's more nuisance than it's worth. I confess I hoped Dixon had plumped on to it, but, of course, there's nothing in this cock-and-bull story of his. 'Premature' indeed! I'll give Mackenzie his instructions this time, myself." He whistled angrily down the tube for the photographer as he spoke.

"I should find out what this Mackenzie thought of the coffin if I were you." The voice was suave as ever, but the malicious humour in the deep-set eyes belied the voice.

"Of course."

The man in the background rose noiselessly and slipped, almost like a shadow departing, into the inner room.

"You know Mr Dixon," he said to his private secretary, who sat there awaiting him.

"Yes, my lord."

"Go down and stop him before he leaves the building and send him up to me. Take the lift and you will catch him."

The secretary vanished, and the man who had sent him returned to the other room to find the photographer just coming in.

"What's this I hear about your taking your instructions from Mr Dixon instead of from me?" demanded the editor angrily.

"Did Dixon tell you that?" returned the Scotsman.

"Never you mind who told me. In future, understand if I send you out to take photographs, photographs you will take."

"But there was nothing to photograph."

"What about the coffin?"

"Coffin?" The photographer's eyes nearly bulged out of his head. The man in the background smiled. "What coffin?"

The editor stamped with vexation. "The Chinaman's coffin, of course."

"We didn't find the Chinaman."

"In the laundry, in the cellar underground."

The photographer's face was a study. "I don't know what you mean, sir," he said helplessly.

"I mean the coffin that you and Mr Dixon found belonging to the Chinaman who keeps the laundry, in an underground cellar, in a little court in Whitechapel. *Now* do you know what I mean?" The editor's sarcasm was as sharp as a knife.

Still the cloud did not lift from the photographer's bewildered countenance. "I saw neither cellar nor Chinaman nor coffin, sir. Dixon must have found it after I left."

"Oh, so you left Mr Dixon, did you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"Yon man Dixon's impossible," Mackenzie burst out with sudden fury. "I'll no' go out with him again. Nine mortal hours I dragged after him, up and down, down and up—him jabbering and asking questions and laughing and flirting with all the women the while. My contract calls for eight hours a day. Yesterday I gave nine. Then the minute my back's turned, off goes Dixon and finds the very man we want."

"But you had the address in your pocket," said the editor sharply. "Why didn't you go there direct?"

The photographer's face flushed a deep crimson. "I'd forgotten to take the address and left it at home."

"Then how did Mr Dixon find where the man lived?"

"I don't know, sir."

The editor stamped again with fury. "You don't seem to know much," he snapped. "Anyway, understand this: to-morrow morning you go with Mr Dixon to this same place in Whitechapel, and take me photographs of the laundry, the man, the woman and the coffin, and the whole caboodle of tricks. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. You can go."

The photographer turned to go, when the man in the background came noiselessly forward and held out his hand. "You might show me that address you have in your pocket."

The Scotsman had been in such a fever of excitement lest the trick he had played on Dixon should be found out that he had not noticed anyone in the room but the editor, and now, recognising the speaker, he nearly jumped out of his skin. "The address, my lord," he stammered. No wonder he was taken back. It was the first time he had ever come in contact with that wonderful man.

"You have it in your pocket, I think." The suave voice was still more suave.

Too taken aback to know what he was doing, the photographer put his hand in his pocket and produced the paper with the address.

"Thanks."

Hardly knowing if he was on his head or his heels, the photographer went out of the room.

"So friend Dixon was not so much to blame as he appeared?"

There was a keen edge to the suave voice which cut the editor to the heart.

"Then why on earth couldn't the young fool have said so at once?"

"You can hardly expect him to give his fellow-worker away, can you?"

"Why not, pray? This is not a place for schoolgirl sentimentalities. This is a place for work. I can't stand these highfalutin ways of Dixon's, standing there, taking the blame and saying nothing. It puts one all in the wrong. Still, there's no doubt, he's clever. Just imagine his ferreting out this man without his address. He has the devil's own luck, has Dixon."

"He has, indeed." A vision of Whitechapel, with its tortuous ways, its winding roads, its everlasting alleys and byways and courts, rose before the speaker's mind. "He has the staying power of a Red Indian, the mentality of a Gaboriau and the *flair* of a bloodhound," he said to himself, with an approving nod.

"Perhaps, after all," he said quietly, "there may be something in this cock-and-bull story of his."

"Not a bit of it." The editor snapped his drawer to, locked it and got up from his chair. "There's nothing in it. I wish to God there were."

The man in the background did not share this opinion, but it was part of his policy never to interfere with his

editors, so he contented himself with wishing the irritated, over-worked man snatching at his hat, a pleasant "Good-evening," and returned to his own room.

Mortimer Dixon was there.

CHAPTER XI

AFTER his interview with the editor he had torn down the stairs, and had barely been caught by the secretary in the hall. He was in such a rage with the editor he could have killed him. "There's nothing in it, isn't there?" he said savagely, retracing his steps. "That's what he's said before, and more than once. We'll jolly well see if there's not the same kind of 'nothing' in this!"

It was in this frame of mind that he entered for the first time the room in which his idol lived.

It was a beautiful room, and at any other moment he would have rejoiced at the opportunity accorded him, so unexpectedly, of noting the surroundings in which the man whom he worshipped lived and worked. But that night he did not even look at it. If you had paid him, he could not have told you the make of the furniture, or the colour of the walls. His face was white with passion, and his eyes were like diamonds as he stood in the centre of the room with his gallant young head thrown up, waiting to hear what further unpleasant things the great people who employed him were about to say.

"Won't you sit down, Mr Dixon?" The manner was charming. The voice, as always, soft and suave.

But neither affected Dixon.

"I'm much obliged to you, my lord," he said curtly. "I prefer to stand."

The man who gauged with perfect accuracy what was passing beneath that calm exterior in that fiery brain, sat down in his revolving chair, and turned it round. "There are one or two questions I want to put to you, Mr Dixon, if you will be good enough to answer them. How did you manage to find the Chinaman, if the address had been left behind?"

" I looked, my lord."

The frail figure in the revolving chair bent a little more forward. " Mr Mackenzie has told us how it was that no photographs were taken, Mr Dixon." He paused, but Mortimer Dixon was still far too angry to care whether or no they had found out that he was not to blame.

" I confess that I should like to know on what grounds you based your opinion that the taking of them would be premature."

" I can't tell you, my lord."

" You mean you won't tell me, Mr Dixon ? "

" I mean I *can't* tell you, my lord."

" Why not ? "

" Because I don't know."

The frail figure in the revolving chair leaned forward a little farther still. " Come now, Mr Dixon," the suave voice said persuasively, " you are not often at a loss for an opinion, are you ? "

In spite of himself Dixon began to smile. " This time is the exception, my lord."

" You would find me interested if you care to explain."

The soft voice was like healing ointment: being poured into an open wound. Dixon's anger melted at the sound of it like ice before the sun.

" It's like this," he said eagerly. He put out his hand and, without heeding what he was doing, drew a chair forward and sat down.

The deep-set eyes noted the little movement and gleamed with satisfaction. It was such unconscious little tributes that men paid him, which lay nearest to his heart.

" The truth is," said Dixon, " I'm in such a muddle that I don't know *how* to explain. I'll just say everything as it comes into my head, and you'll see for yourself what a beast of a muddle it is."

" That is exactly what I want you to do."

" Well," said Dixon, " the minute the chief sent for me and put me on to this job, I knew something was up. The minute I spotted that mat lying across the top of the cellar I knew I was on the right track. The minute I set eyes on that Chinaman—I don't know a thing about Chinamen, mind you—I knew he was the right man. He's no common Chink. He's an aristocrat."

" How do you know that ? "

"First by his hands. You could tell at a glance he had never been used to doing any work."

"I thought you said he ironed to perfection."

"So I did; but there are ways and ways of doing things. Once I was sent to report at the East End where a duchess made a pie at a cookery class. She made a pie like a chef, but no one but a fool would have taken her for a cook."

"The great aristocracy of Chinamen have long nails."

"But not when they want to pass themselves off as common Chinks. Another thing that makes me so sure was his shirt. The white kind of a coat that he wore was common enough, but when he had that fainting attack, and I opened the collar, the shirt underneath was of the purest Chinese silk. Then there was his pigtail. That was his own."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"I pulled it." The young journalist grinned at the thought. "That's what gave the trick away. His face was the face of a devil; he would have killed me if he had had a knife in his hand."

"Perhaps you hurt him when you pulled his pigtail?"

"It was not the hurting that upset him. It was my daring to touch him at all. It wasn't the rage of a common man who had had his feelings hurt, it was the rage of a great nobleman who had been touched by one of the common herd."

"You are a shrewd observer, Mr Dixon, for your age."

"It's my trade, my lord. I don't observe half as much as I ought. Why, I was in such a rage when I came into this room just now, that I might have walked out of it without even noticing that your walls were pink"—Dixon's eyes darted round the room—"much less that one of the panels had been papered wrong side up." He pulled himself together. "I beg your pardon, my lord, I'm diffuse. As I was saying, from all these little things, I knew well enough that that Chink was not a common man. But if I had any doubt about it, the coffin would have shown me pretty quick where I stood. It was a gorgeous thing. The wood was of the finest grain; the lacquer was almost as thick as the wood; the places for the medallions were set round with real gems."

"Many quite middle-class Chinamen spend a small fortune on their coffins."

"Yes, my lord; but the figures in the medallions had *their* finger-nails inches long, encased in gold."

The deep-set eyes flashed with satisfaction. As the two men sat together in the deepening twilight, there was no distinction of class or position between them. They were both cast in such a mould of true greatness that they talked as equals as a matter of course. They looked less like a young journalist submitting a report to the greatest newspaper proprietor in the world, than like two generals on the eve of a great battle planning a campaign.

"I may be right, and I may be wrong," Dixon continued rapidly, "but I've made up my mind that the Chinaman I spoke to in the cellar is the same Chinaman that's been mixed up with this girl."

"You think he abducted her?"

Dixon laughed. "Not any more than he's married the char."

"Then, where has the girl got to?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

"So far I do not see any signs of your being in a muddle, Mr Dixon."

"No, my lord; but it's here that the muddle begins. If I said to anyone else what I'm going to say to you, nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand would think I was mad, or a fool; but you will understand, possibly better than I understand myself. There's something in me, my lord, I don't know what it is or where it comes from, but an indescribable something which, when I'm excited, comes over me and tells me if I'm right." He broke off and looked into the wonderful face across the table. "The explanation is more muddly than the muddle, but I think you understand."

"I understand, Mr Dixon. Go on."

"That feeling came to me when my friend Carew told me about the supper. That wasn't a coincidence; that was hard, solid fact. The minute I got into the flat to-day that feeling came back to me, stronger this time than anything I had ever felt before. It was the poor chap who had committed suicide there that seemed to muddle me: like another scent passed across the trail. But, now I'm free of it, my impression's quite clear, there is some extraordinary connec-

tion between that Chinaman and that flat. He goes there."

"How do you know that?"

"There was the same extraordinary smell in the flat, my lord, as there was in the cellar. Vinegar and spice."

"Both commodities usually to be found in an English kitchen, Mr Dixon. Don't let your undoubted gift for construction based on imagination lead you too far. That way lies danger."

"Imagination based on fact, my lord."

"Fact?"

Dixon put his hand into his breast-pocket, and drawing out his pocket-book carefully extracted from it a piece of tissue paper, which he laid on the table. "I have got a proof here, my lord."

"Open the paper."

Dixon opened it carefully. Coiled up inside was the long black hair.

"Where did you find this, Mr Dixon?"

"In the bedroom occupied by the charwoman, in her hair-brush."

"Her own hair."

Dixon smiled. "The charwoman's hair is short."

There was a pause. Both men sat and stared at the delicate thread of black lying on the white surface of the paper, as if it were a magic thing.

"Your friend possibly keeps other maids, Mr Dixon."

"He has only just gone into the flat, my lord. Till he returns from Berlin he has been valeted by the porter, and only keeps this char."

"Young men sometimes have visitors."

"Undoubtedly, my lord; but they wouldn't use the servants' room."

"In your friend's absence this charwoman may also possibly have visitors."

"Visitors of that class do not usually remove their bonnets. If they do, they don't brush their hair. If they brush their hair they don't take it down, my lord. Whoever lost this hair"—Dixon tapped the paper with his forefinger—"brushed their hair when it was down."

"Excellently argued, Mr Dixon. You ought to have gone in for the law."

“It was my ambition, my lord, but my mother, who was a widow, had not the means.”

Again there was a pause. Then the older man spoke again.

“Granting all that you say may be true, still nothing you have yet said proves to my satisfaction that this particular hair comes from the head of a Chinaman.”

“Smell it, my lord.”

The great man bent forward slowly, and leant his face down over the paper. A fragrance, subtle and aromatic—at once pungent and delicate—a fragrance unmistakably recalling the strange and mystic perfumes of the East, floated up, a silent witness to Dixon’s genius, on the still, hot air.

Not a word was spoken, but as the bowed head was raised again, one glance into the deep-set eyes told Mortimer Dixon that though all the editors in London might deny the truth of the story, here, at least, was one whom he had convinced.

“Let us grant that things are as you say, and that this particular hair belongs to this particular man. What of it? What more natural, seeing their relations, than that the charwoman in her master’s absence should have the Chinaman to the flat. Possibly he is her husband.”

“Possibly, my lord.”

“Or perhaps her lover?”

“Perhaps, my lord.”

“You know, Mr Dixon, there is unhappily no disputing the fact that these Chinamen exercise a most extraordinary fascination over some white women.”

“I’m not disputing that fact, my lord.”

“But you do not think that he is her husband or her lover.”

“I’m jolly well sure he’s not.”

“Then why does he go to the flat?”

Dixon banged his hand on the table. “That’s what all the muddle’s about. The laundry’s a blind, of course. The charwoman he uses for his own purposes. The girl types his letters that he’s afraid to write himself. They’re probably both in love with him. Anyway, the char is. I saw that for myself when he fainted away. But what’s he doing at the flat? That’s what I want to know.”

“And that’s what I want to know.” The great man

leaned forward suddenly and seized Dixon by the arm. "You are up against a big thing, Dixon; possibly bigger than you are aware. But find the man I want! Find him and you will make a friend of me for life."

At the touch of those nervous fingers Mortimer Dixon flushed like a girl. From that first day when he had made up his mind to become a journalist, the ambition of his soul had been to serve this man. The mere thought of such a possibility set his blood coursing through his veins like fire. "I'll find him for you, my lord."

"If it is within human possibility, Mr Dixon, I believe you will."

The nervous grasp relaxed; the passion in the deep-set eyes disappeared. The courtly manner and the suave voice were back again, making that instant's betrayal of what lay beneath that quiet surface seem almost like a dream. One of the greatest moments of Mortimer Dixon's life had come and gone almost in a breathing-space, but it had left its mark on him for the rest of his life. For the third time during that strange interview there was a pause. Then the young man, feeling himself dismissed, though not a word had been spoken, made a movement to go.

"You will return to Whitechapel, of course."

"Yes, my lord."

"First thing to-morrow morning with Mackenzie the photographer."

"Pardon me, my lord, to-night."

"Are you not going out to a party?"

"No, my lord."

"Then why are you dressed?"

"I dress every night, my lord."

The stern glance, bent on the gallant young figure in its immaculate clothes, softened. In the far-distant days of his own upward striving, he, too, had "dressed every night." His pride in his white shirt-front had often been at the expense of his dinner, but it was said of him, and said of him truly, that to him ambition was a greater necessity than food. As he stood and looked at Dixon, noting in him one after the other, as they appeared, those attributes which he most cherished in himself, he felt strangely drawn to the young man starting out so fearlessly, so well equipped to run the great race of life, and he wished, with a passion that burned his innermost soul, that he was a son of his own.

For that was the one great flaw in the career which had set Europe talking. All his great possessions and honours fell as dust and ashes before him. In a room in one of his great mansions, his sick wife lay watching the hours go by. Rich poor man! whose one ambition had been to found a great family, he had no son.

“What do you expect to find at Whitechapel when you get there?”

“Nothing, my lord. If my conclusions are even remotely correct, my bird will have flown.”

“Then why go?”

“Having been fool enough to let him slip from under my hand once, the least I can do is to lose no time in finding him again.”

“I shall not be requiring my own car for another hour. My man can run you down there if you like.”

Despite his self-control, Dixon's voice shook as he declined the offer. “I sha'n't be going myself till nearly nine. I am interviewing the mother of the girl who has disappeared at my rooms at eight.”

“Then you had better go to your own dinner. I will wish you good-night.” The great man held out his hand, and Dixon clasped it with an enthusiasm so overwhelming that his blue eyes almost smarted into tears. It was not the man's title, nor his pride of place, nor his possessions, that he worshipped. It was the greatness of the man.

So they stood an instant, hand grasped in hand, looking in each other's eyes, and the same smile, extraordinary in its transforming power of fascination, illuminating the faces of both. So marked, indeed, was the resemblance, that a stranger, beholding them, would have taken them for father and son.

So they grasped hands and parted, and Dixon, mad with elation, with no more thought of dinner than if food did not exist, rushed back to his own rooms.

The man with the deep-set eyes sat for a moment gazing thoughtfully before him, then he went to the wall, and ran his hand slowly to and fro across the paper.

He nodded his head contentedly. It was as Mortimer Dixon had told him—the paper in that particular panel had been put on upside down.

CHAPTER XII

At five minutes to eight the mother of the girl arrived.

She was tall, with a plain but pleasing face, her appearance and speech both refined beyond her station in life.

With a directness equalling Dixon's own, she recounted the loss of her girl. It was a statement shorn of all expression, admirable in its lucidity, and yet, through it all, underlying the piteous words, he seemed to discern a passion of pride and belief in the missing girl. Seated quietly in his little room, she told her story without emotion and without comment. As a plain statement of fact, it was admirable. As an explanation of the mystery surrounding the whole adventure, it left much to be desired. In the telling, there was not one point elucidated that Dixon did not already know.

Almost word for word, it was exactly the same as he had told it himself in the Park that afternoon.

The girl was beautiful. She was dressed above her station, in her cousin's clothes. She had been besieged by admirers, but would only look at the one man of whom her mother refused to approve. The engagement had been broken off at the mother's command. For a time the girl had lost flesh, colour, appetite and spirits. During the last few months, however, she had, apparently, got over the trouble, for all her natural gaiety and health had returned. She had been working at the ironmonger's for two years, and they were so satisfied that they had raised her salary twice.

The mother had nothing to complain of in her daughter. She was hard-working, ambitious, very mindful of their social downfall, and very anxious to regain their former status. No mother could have a better daughter.

"You and she were the best of friends always?" asked Mortimer Dixon gently.

The woman turned on him almost fiercely. "Until *that man* came between us, she and I were all the world to each other. We never had a word."

"And after this undesirable suitor appeared on the scene?"

"Then, for a time," the mother confessed bitterly, "things *were* a bit changed. It's always the way with young people, when they want to do something that wiser

heads than theirs know will bring them to harm. Perhaps the reason I felt so bitterly about it was because of my own married life. I made my own bed, and I lay on it without complaining. But this"—she threw out her hands—"this sorrow is none of my making. I've been dragged through the gutter, but whatever I've felt I've said nothing, for I knew there was nobody to blame but myself; but my girl,—what have I done," she demanded passionately, "that some villain I never even set eyes on should steal away my girl?"

"You don't think it possible she's gone abroad somewhere and joined this undesirable lover of hers?"

The woman shook her head. "No. She would have done most things for him, but not that. I'm not saying he mightn't have tried to persuade her to go if he had got the money, but my girl would have told me first."

"Even if she had known that you would have done your utmost to prevent her? Young passion is apt to think of one thing, Mrs Latham—*itself*."

"I'm not denying that, sir; but it was not that way with my girl." With a sudden movement she flung herself on her knees at his feet and broke into a passion of tears. "For God's sake, sir, find my daughter! Bring her back to me dead or living. I don't care what she's done, where she's been or what people have done to her; all I want is my girl."

"Come, come," said Dixon kindly, "you mustn't give way like this. That won't help either your girl or you."

"It's easy enough to say, don't give way," answered the woman bitterly, "but when I think of my darling, snatched from me without a word, carried off goodness knows where, swallowed up in this great big London, perhaps even shipped abroad——" She wrung her hands in a paroxysm of misery.

"You hear such awful things about these Chinamen down our way. They get round the girls with their sly looks and their presents, and lead them astray, and then, either because they're too ashamed to come home, or because they're not given a chance to come back, they just disappear like my girl, and no one ever hears of them again. There's lots of queer things happen in London that nobody knows about, not even the police, and, oftener than enough, *they*

keep their mouths shut, because it's no credit to the force when they can't find the mystery out. Would anyone believe it possible that in a great city like London, with police at the corner of every street, in broad daylight, a respectable girl can vanish without leaving any trace of where she's gone or who she's gone with, just as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up?"

"It's easy enough to vanish if one goes of one's own accord, Mrs Latham."

The woman rose to her feet with the dignity only tragedy can bestow. "You're like the rest of them, Mr Dixon. You think my girl's run off with some man, and is safe and sound enjoying herself. But you're wrong. You don't know my girl. I've lived with her, watched her, worked for her, loved her all the years of her life. You've never even set eyes on her. Who should be the best judge of what she's likely to do—her mother or you?"

In the face of such passionate faith Dixon was silent. There seemed nothing left for him to say.

"No," said the woman, "we may never get at the truth of this horrible thing, but I know, whatever else she may have done, my girl's not kept me suffering this agony for nearly a week of her own accord. If she had been mad enough and wicked enough to run away without telling me beforehand, she would have let me know she was safe before she slept that night. You mark my words, that Chinaman's got hold of her for some evil purpose of his own." Her voice rose shrilly with excitement. "My God! perhaps at this moment she's shut up in some opium den, and those beasts are ill-treating her!" She threw herself into a chair with her elbows on the table, her hands framing her ravaged face. "Oh, God," she cried, "have mercy on me, help me to find my girl!"

"Come, Mrs Latham, stop crying." Dixon laid his hand on her shoulder. "Just you leave off worrying. I'll find your girl."

Something in the authoritative tone of his voice, something in the magnetic quality of his touch, arrested her. She made a violent effort to check her wild sobbing, and her poor tear-bedimmed eyes glanced eagerly up into Dixon's face.

"How are you going to find her?" she asked him brokenly.

His sunny smile shone down on her. "God knows," he said simply; "but find her I will."

The unhappy mother seized his hand and, before he was able to stop her, kissed it in a passion of gratitude. "I'll lay down my life for you if only you'll bring her back to me again."

"That's all right," he said simply. "Don't you worry. I'll find her."

A thrill of emotion ran through the unhappy woman, transforming her plain face into something almost like beauty. "God bless you, sir," she said solemnly. "I believe you will. I don't know what there is about you, or why I should feel like this, but somehow, when you said that, my trouble seemed to lighten, and for the first time during these awful days of anguish I know what it is to feel hope."

"You go on hoping," said Dixon gaily, patting her shoulder. "Hope's the finest thing in the world."

With the innate refinement characteristic of herself, Mrs Latham felt that she had no right to intrude any longer, and that the time had arrived for her to go. She rose, but half-way to the door, overcome by helplessness, misery, emotion and want of food, she reeled and would have fallen if Mortimer had not steadied her with his arm.

"Look here," he said, in his boyish way, "this won't do, you know. I bet you've not eaten anything since you first heard the news?"

She shook her head faintly. "I can't eat."

"Then you're going to now," he said cheerfully. "I haven't had anything either, and I'm hungry as a hunter. You will find some tea and some eggs and bacon in this little room." He opened the door as he spoke. "Now suppose, instead of laying down your life for me, you buck up and cook yourself and me a nice little meal." He threw open the spotless little cupboard. "Here's the teapot and the cups and the matches, and there's the gas." He laid his hand on her shoulder. "Now just you trust me," he said quietly, "and do as I tell you, and you'll see, before another week's out, you will be sitting at home in your own cosy little parlour making tea for your girl."

The woman looked up at him as if he were a god. The hot tears welled up into her faded eyes again, but Dixon had had enough of crying.

"Now then," he said, deliberately ignoring the fact that she was on the verge of another breakdown, "look lively, please. I want my supper by the time I've changed my clothes." He banged into his bedroom, slammed the door, and left her alone to her own devices.

So magic was the spell of his personality, that not only did the heart-broken woman turn to lay the table and prepare the food, but, at the sound of his happy whistling through the thin walls, a tremulous smile came to her lips.

"He's like a sea breeze on a hot summer morning," she said to herself. "If there is anyone in London who can do it, it's that young man, with a face like a boy's and a smile like sunshine, who will find my girl."

So it came to pass that within a very few minutes Dixon and his strangely invited guest were sitting at the little table together, both partaking with excellent appetites of an admirably cooked meal. The bacon was cooked just as he liked it. The eggs were done to a turn. The tea was the strength he always made it, and, to complete his satisfaction, she put the milk into his cup before the tea. Anyone seeing them together would have immediately jumped to the conclusion that they were witnessing a picture of high domestic felicity between a devoted mother and son.

The spotless white tablecloth, the spotless white china, the bunch of roses, the polished crystal of the little glass dish which held the strawberry jam, the kettle hissing on the hob and the cat purring on the hearth—who, beholding them, would have guessed that the woman was a heart-broken mother whose girl had been torn from her, and that the man was one of the most distinguished journalists in London on the eve of setting forth to unravel another history of sorrow and crime?

The strangely assorted pair broke bread together, and while they ate they talked. For once in his life, however, it was not Dixon who overflowed to the stranger, but the stranger who overflowed to him. Naturally enough, the overflowing was all about her daughter. Her pretty face. Her pretty ways. Her quickness at learning. Her passion for beautiful things, "It stabbed me to the heart when I saw that bracelet," the unhappy woman said, breaking down again. "That's what he tempted my girl away with. Oh! it's the uncertainty that's killing me. If I could see my

darling lying at rest and peace in her coffin, I could bear it better than this."

"Hang coffins!" cried Mortimer Dixon roughly. "I've got to be off. Come on and wash up."

He sprang up from the table, whipped off his coat, turned up his shirt-sleeves, and hustled his guest before him into the scullery with the piled-up tray in his hands. "Look sharp," he rattled on; "you dry, and I'll wash up." He hitched a clean cloth into his trouser-band, and deftly began washing up the cups; and all the time he washed, all the time he talked and laughed, that subconscious mind of his, furiously alert, was revolving and reviewing the situation from every point of view.

"So my man is alive and kicking, is he?" he said to himself, deftly washing the water about the cups. "Then I suppose his illness was all part and parcel of the same gigantic fake! I might have known, when the old girl refused to have an English doctor, something was up, and yet it seemed so natural that she should fetch in one of the Chink's own people. After all said and done, everyone craves for a familiar face when they're going to hand in their chips. I can't blame myself for not seeing through that. Alive and kicking, is he?" he thought to himself bitterly. "You've been taken in and done brown, my boy. You bouncing, blithering, self-satisfied ass! Taken in and done brown, as if you were playing the game for the first time! And yet"—he left off washing up, and his eyes dilated—"yet I can't believe that that man was taking me in! These Chinks are sly dogs, but his eyes weren't sly. They cheat and fake and do you all ends up, but that man wasn't doing me. You don't lay your hand on your own coffin—on the threshold of death—and he was pretty near dying if ever a man was—and talk about lying on the bosom of your gods as he talked, unless you mean what you say!"

"I'm ready for some more cups, sir," said the quiet voice beside him.

Dixon returned to his washing-up, but his thoughts went on all the same.

"So he's alive and kicking! Well, if he is, and everything's on the square, he'll be at the laundry to-night. The laundry'll be there; *he'll* be there; and *she'll* be there. But they won't be! Whether he abducted the girl or whether he didn't, doesn't come into the question. He's the

man I'm looking for! He's the man that HE wants me to find! There's something more in all this than meets the eye. I'm up against a big thing. HE said so, and, if I die for it, I'll carry it through. If he's there to-night, I'm wrong in all my conclusions. If he *isn't* there, I'm right. *And he won't be there!* I bet my boots that when I get down there to-night the whole lot of 'em will have cleared out. It must have been ten o'clock when I left that place last night," he thought to himself, "and the moon was at the full about two. It gets light early at this time of the year. They could easily get rid of the irons and the kettles and the washing, and all the things belonging to that blessed little lot, during the daytime. But the coffin—the coffin's quite another pair of shoes. In that little court, with all those kids about, however much they wrapped it up, a huge thing like that going up through that yard would attract a lot of attention. If I'm not much mistaken they will wait to get rid of that until to-night. To-night the moon doesn't rise till twelve, so it will be somewhere about midnight that they'll fetch the thing away. If I get down there about ten and hide myself in the first cellar, it will be quite easy for me to nip up the steps after them and follow them wherever they go."

He turned to Mrs Latham, who was putting the crockery away into the cupboard. "Look slippy," he said to her. "I'm going to see you home."

He cut short her expostulations and, while she was getting her things on, he unfolded his plans to her, as if he had taken hours in concocting them, instead of having decided what he was going to do in the twinkling of an eye, without any preconceived plan. "I don't want you to be seen with me, you understand. I will go downstairs first—I want a word with the hall porter below—wait five minutes, then you come down and you'll see me talking to a taxicab-driver—the number of the cab is thirteen, at the end of Northumberland Avenue. Know the way?"

"Yes, sir." The woman eyes, red with weeping, suddenly became eager and alert.

"Walk on, down to where the buses go to Whitechapel, and wait till you see me. Get into the same bus as I do, and when you come to the street where you ought to get out, stop the bus, and I'll get out too. If there is nobody hanging around, I'll walk home with you. If there is, I sha'n't take

any notice of you, and don't you take any notice of me. Now, repeat what I've just said to you."

She did so docilely, like an intelligent child.

"Right-o." Dixon nodded his head approvingly. "Now I'm going to clear." Without waiting for another word, he snatched up his hat and took himself down the stairs.

In the entrance hall, as he had expected, stood the hall porter taking the evening air. At the sight of Dixon he evinced considerable surprise.

"Understood you to be away, sir."

"I *am* away," said Dixon calmly.

The man grinned broadly. "Beg pardon, sir, thought you was here."

"You're not paid to think," said Dixon pleasantly. "You're paid to shut your eyes." He slipped half-a-crown into the man's broad palm. "Mum's the word, if anyone asks for me. Understand?"

"I understand, sir. Do you want a taxi?"

Dixon shook his head. "No, thanks; I'm waiting for my aunt. I've been giving her tea."

"Yes, sir." The man's eye twinkled. For all his liking for Dixon he was no sharer in his wife's belief in that young gentleman's saintliness. His understanding became clearer than ever, and he drew his own conclusions after the manner of his kind.

"Be good enough to tell her, when she comes down, that I have gone to get her a four-wheeler," said Dixon, who knew very well what was passing in the other's mind.

"Very good, sir." He touched his hat and stood aside, and Dixon passed out.

Five minutes later down came Mrs Latham. The porter's face, when he beheld her, was a sight to behold. "Mr Dixon's gone up Northumberland Avenue to get you a four-wheeler, ma'am," he said respectfully.

A remnant of her better-class days came back to Mrs Latham. "I'm much obliged to you," she said primly, and without either hurry or flurry walked quietly up the street.

"Well, I'm blowed," ejaculated that worthy functionary, staring after her. "It *was* his aunt, after all!"

CHAPTER XIII

AT the end of Northumberland Avenue the widow's quick eye immediately espied Dixon talking, as he had arranged, with the driver of the taxicab.

"You know where you picked me up last night?" Dixon was saying in a rapid undertone. "Well, I want you to keep yourself free for my employment the whole of this evening, and perhaps the whole of to-night. You see, it's like this. I'm a journalist. I've got a nasty bit of work to be done Whitechapel way. I want someone to be there, handy, in case I require a cab."

"Shall I drive you down there now, sir?"

"No; what I want you to do is this: nip across the road, and watch the bus I get on to. Follow it slowly, and watch when I get out. It depends what happens then on what directions I have to give you. Understand?"

"I understand, sir."

On that they parted. Dixon crossed the street. Mrs Latham followed him. The taxicab-driver turned his cab round and followed them both.

The first bus was full. The second bus had only room for one. On the third bus there was room for two—one inside and one out. Mortimer Dixon went outside. Mrs Latham got inside. The taxicab moved slowly after the bus.

On went the bus, jolting and stopping, now running at full speed, now impeded by the traffic, going barely at a crawl. Its progress reminded Dixon of his own brain. One minute it seemed to rush forward at top speed, full of ideas, the next it shunted back, and one lot of ideas dismissed as useless, another set of ideas, totally unlike the first, came into his brain. Suddenly his line of reasoning was brought up sharp by some unexpected obstacle, which reduced his thought to a standstill, and put him back at the beginning of his thoughts again.

One thing, and one thing only, stood out clear and strong amidst all the confusion, the underground cellar in the court. On what he found there, he must base his whole future course of action; until he knew that, he resolutely dismissed the whole train of thought from his mind, and fixed his attention exclusively on the passers-by.

It is a strange experience to an observant mind to take a

bus ride through London town. As one goes from stopping-place to stopping-place, the character of the people changes to such an extraordinary extent that they might be inhabitants of a different world. There was nothing Dixon more passionately loved than to sit on the top of a motor bus and watch the passing crowd, unconscious of his scrutiny, displaying their idiosyncrasies for his private edification.

That evening, as he drove on towards his danger-fraught errand, he found himself surveying the multitude with the same unflinching passion of curiosity. It might very well be the last time he would ever take a ride through London, but that was, for him, no reason why he should not enjoy it as much as he could. On the contrary, had he known for certain that never again would he sit idly smoking his cigarette, while the unseen forces of civilisation took him through London town, it would have been, for him, all the more reason to enjoy himself to the fullest extent.

His ideas of the mystery which lies behind the veil were very much like the ideas he held in common with other men of his class and age. He was not given to sentimentalising over himself as a nonentity to be returned to the universal smelting-pot so feared by Peer Gynt, any more than he found any particular satisfaction in picturing himself as an angel flying endlessly through an idle eternity, on golden wings. As a matter of fact, he probably passed amongst those who knew him as an ordinarily irreligious man. Nevertheless, deep down in his heart of hearts lay a reverence, supreme and devoted, for the Divine Being who had called forth Order out of Chaos, and created for His own purposes the splendid madness of sin and passion which men call life.

If ever a man lived who loved life, it was Mortimer Dixon. He loved the earth ; he loved the sun ; he loved the moon ; he loved the stars. The raging sea was his passion ; the trees, blowing in the breeze, were his delight ; the clouds, in their gorgeous shapes and colours, were to him a perpetual source of thanksgiving. Nor did he stop at those high things. He loved a good dinner. He loved a good horse. If he swam, it was with the ardour of the drowning man seeing land in sight. If he danced, it was with the frenzy of a Dervish whirling in ecstasy before his god. If he played a game of tennis or cricket or football, you would have

thought his whole life depended upon the issue. Once, in a moment of unusual inspiration, he said to the girl he loved, that he even loved Death.

"I'm mad to go on living until I haven't a drop of life left in me," he told her, in his passionate way. "But when it comes to dying, then, by heaven! I will be glad to die. Death must have its mysteries. Death must have its passions. Death must have its work, as well as life. It is glorious to live, but I can well see that it may also be just as glorious to die."

Be that as it may, whether, when his time came, Mortimer Dixon would find death a glory, remained to be seen, but at least he was not afraid to die.

It was this faculty of his that made it possible for him to start out single-handed so light-heartedly, on such a quest as now fell to his share. When the bus had puffed and panted and snorted its way into the heart of Whitechapel, and Mrs Latham got out, Dixon ran down the steps as gaily as if he were going to pay an afternoon call. For a moment he stood on the kerbstone as one stranded in a strange neighbourhood, uncertain which way to go. He stood there and took in his bearings. Before him, the great road full of hurrying multitudes; to his right, wriggling in and out of the lumbering traffic, the taxi with its shining lamps and its spotless chauffeur; behind him, the quiet little side-street, with its respectable, small houses; to the left of him, the departing bus.

He was just about to follow the widow when his sharp eye caught sight of two Chinamen with bundles under their arms, swiftly clambering up the steps of a bus. In an instant his mind was made up. He looked up, as a man looks for the name of a street, and stepping up to Mrs Latham politely raised his hat. "Point as if you were directing me," he said quickly. "Go home; don't worry. If there's anything to tell you, I'll come."

The widow looked at him strangely. "You're a wonderful man," she said slowly. "I shall sleep to-night in peace. Something tells me you will find my girl." A light of almost unearthly brilliance flashed into her tired eyes. "Your mother must be a very happy woman! Perhaps that is why you have been so kind to me."

A cloud fell across Dixon's joyous young countenance. "My mother was a very unhappy woman, Mrs Latham,"

he said slowly. "Perhaps that is why I want to try and lessen your unhappiness for you."

"God bless you," said the widow slowly, "and good-bye." Still pointing with her hand as if directing him, she stood and watched him go.

So for the second time that day a woman's lips had blessed him. He was no churchgoer, and no believer in psalm-singing and parsons, but God's blessing sounded very sweetly in his ears as he boarded the second bus, where the Chinamen sat on the top.

To a European eye, most Chinese faces bear such a resemblance to each other that few people can tell them apart. Mortimer Dixon, however, with his gift for faces, had trained his eye to a higher capacity of observation than most. What the two men were talking about, of course, he had no notion, seeing that they spoke Chinese, but that they were discussing something highly momentous was obvious from the vehement undertones in which they spoke. One was evidently superior to the other, for while the second listened submissively, the first appeared to be laying down the law. Dixon, in his seat behind them, told himself that, from the expression of the second Chinaman's, he judged the first was imposing conditions he found it either difficult or impossible to concede.

Suddenly they both rose, and in another minute he found himself following them down the steps of the bus.

It was now close on nine, and the light was beginning to fade. He cast a glance over his shoulder to make sure that the taxi was still following, and then he idly slouched off behind the two quaint figures in their blue cotton coats and their pigtails. In less than two minutes they stopped, and entered a small eating-house which displayed a placard in the windows, announcing that there was a room for a single gentleman to let.

In went the Chinamen. In went Mortimer Dixon and inquired the price of the room.

"Seven-and-six a week, paid in advance," said the woman, "and no questions asked."

"You can ask all the questions you like," said he gallantly. "The more the better, if it's you who asks them. Haven't you got a better room than that in a nice house like yours?"

The woman's hard face smirked itself into something

remotely resembling a smile. "You can 'ave a better one come Saturday. Those two Chinks you saw come in just now have the first floor front, a nice room with a pianner. You can 'ave that if you can run to a pound a week."

"I don't want anyone turned out for me," said Dixon politely.

"Do you take me for a Juggins? They're leaving this week!"

"It's a bargain," said Dixon, producing a sovereign. "Bags I the first floor front, with the pianner!" He made as if to drop the coin into the woman's dirty hand, then drew it back. "I suppose it's not because the Chinks aren't satisfied that they're leaving?" he asked abruptly, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

The woman threw back her untidy head. "Dissatisfied, indeed! They've been 'ere three months and chance it!"

Dixon gave her the sovereign. "I suppose I couldn't see the room?"

"No, you couldn't. But you can take it from me, it's a little bit of all right, or them Chinks wouldn't have stayed so long. They're some class, they are. None of yer low lodgers for me, thank yer kindly."

"Made their fortunes, I suppose, and going back to China, eh?" said Dixon, in his genial way.

The woman's dull eye suddenly took on the cunning intelligence of a ferret. "Look 'ere, young man," she said. "No questions asked, and no questions answered. That's my motter!"

"And a very good motter too!" returned Dixon. "On Saturday, then, and perhaps you'll have no objection to taking in my things when they come."

"The Chinks is leaving off on Friday, so yer can send 'em Saturday morning if yer like. Want a receipt?"

"No, thank you," returned Dixon gallantly. "Not from *you*." He swept her a bow that would have mollified a duchess and went out of the shop. A few doors down stood the taxi drawn up to the kerb, with the driver busily tinkering away at the wheel.

"Tyre bust, mate?" inquired Dixon. Then, as the two men bent over the wheel together, he whispered: "Go into that little eating-shop and eat and drink till you can't eat another bite nor drink another drop. If those two Chinks I was following come out, follow them for all you're

worth. If they don't, stay there till they do. I'll be at the same place in the Commercial Road where you picked me up last night between twelve and one, if I can. If I don't turn up before one, don't wait any longer. If I don't turn up at Northumberland Avenue to-morrow, go to the office of *The Sentinel* in Fleet Street, and they'll pay you your fare."

"And where will you be, sir?"

"In heaven, most likely," said Dixon, laughing. "I hear they're short of angels up there."

"I don't know about angels up there, but I know we're precious short of men down here. I shouldn't be in a hurry if I was you, sir."

"I'm not," said Dixon, laughing. "If you take my advice, you'll stick to cheese and tomatoes in that little shop. If you can judge of the kitchen by the cook, God help the man who eats the beef!" He left the man still tinkering with the wheel, and was off.

First to the right, second to the left, up the alley, down the steps, out at the end, until, once again, he stood at the entrance to the little court.

The day before, he had been there in the late afternoon and the place was full of sun and light. Now it was close on ten o'clock, and the little yard was shrouded in the shadows of the on-coming night. Where he stood at the end of the alley, he could catch a vista of the sky. It was a luminous primrose, and in the heart of that patch of glory, suspended like a jewel, there burned the evening star. The artist in him responded to that exquisite vision of distant glory, with a rapture of joy in its beauty that seemed to lift his spirit through measureless space to those remote realms of bliss, the eternal way where the crystal rivers flow unceasingly before the flaming throne of God.

For an instant, lost in his joyous contemplation of that serene and exquisite sight, Mortimer Dixon was tempted to underrate the dignity of his own work. This mad searching out the heart of evil seemed a sordid thing; a thing without dignity; a thing so low in itself that it ought to be done only by those who were low themselves.

Yet after all, thought the young journalist, what higher mission could there be on earth than to right a wrong, to make the dark places on earth white and clean; to substitute truth for lies, and life for death; to help on the justice and

order of the universe—what higher mission could any man undertake?

More like a knight of old, holding vigil beneath the stars, seeking for strength before he started out to his great fight, than a young twentieth-century journalist setting out on a chase, he withdrew his gaze from the luminous heavens and returned to earth.

The court, as he noted before, was deserted. In the tumbledown houses which surrounded it, there was not one flicker of light. Behind those dirty rows of windows, inhaling impure air, slept the little children who had pressed round him so eagerly the day before. The old archway, worn and dim, stood like a gateway guarding the sinister secret which Mortimer Dixon, holding his life in his hand, had come down to solve.

Stealthily he crept forward, until he came to the opening of the cellar. Warily he bent down, and put out his hand, groping for the mat. The touch of the soft wool came against his hand almost with a shock. With that facility of his for finding humour in situations where most men would only find terror, he caught himself wondering if, as he drew it aside, he had got hold of the dragon's tail.

The aperture, opening out into the darkness, disclosed itself with the effect of a great mouth waiting in readiness to devour whatever might fall into its yawning jaws.

"Gollypots!" said he, on his knees, staring down into the unfathomable depths. "What a fool I am to go into this single-handed!"

No doubt about it, a fool he was. But it is such fools as he that have made of this little island, set in the raging seas, an empire which rules the whole of the civilised world.

Down he sat and swung his legs over the parapet, as he had swung them the day before. Well for him he swung them no farther, otherwise he would have broken his neck. The shock of kicking his heels into empty air instead of against solid stone was startling.

Clutching with both hands on either side of him at the flagstones, he stared down into the pit which opened itself out before him. There he sat perfectly still, as if petrified from sheer shock.

The steps had gone!

Now, as average men go, Dixon was a tall man. He stood in his boots slightly over six foot. His arms, slightly out

of proportion to his height, brought up his reach an extra three feet. Like lightning he began to calculate the depth of the drop. "If I bumped once down those damned steps, I must have bumped twelve times," he told himself. "Each of those bumps, allowing for the wearing away of the step, must have been at least about ten inches. Double my height and chance it. Gollypots, I *am* an ass! Still, here goes!" He reached forward and gripped the other side and, without an instant's hesitation, dropped into the black abyss.

Did he bless those years of training at the London Polytechnic? You bet your boots he did! Although the drop was a good three feet deeper than he reckoned, he arrived at the bottom safe and sound. A thing like that takes a bit of doing, especially when one has to consider how one has to get up, but that did not trouble Dixon. He was in the place he wanted to be in, and that was all he cared for. Time enough to think of how to get back again when he wanted to get out.

Cautiously he crept forward, holding his breath, and listening at every step. There was not a sound. He ran on another few steps and then stopped again, inhaling the foul air. There was the smell that there is in a tunnel, or subterranean passage. Nothing more.

"Laundry's gone!" said he triumphantly. "No nice-picee soap-soap, no steamee-peemee gas-gas!" He darted forward and his hands came in contact with a soft substance which gave beneath his touch. "Gollypots! they've forgotten the black velvet curtain." With a foolhardiness that was, under the circumstances, almost criminal, he tore the curtain aside, and struck a match.

There was the inner cellar. Blank ceiling, blank walls. Kettles gone. Irons gone. Clothes gone. Gas jet gone. Copper gone.

The place was as clean and as bare as the palm of his hand.

The match spluttered and went out. He leaned up against the wall and gasped for breath.

"I'm right! I'm right! I'm right!" he said over and over, beside himself with glee. "They've cleared the whole caboodle away, as I said they would!"

This man, who had not felt a tremor of fear as he ran forward through that hideous cellar, shook like an aspen leaf with joy.

Then he pulled himself together and began to think.

Mad thoughts, mad plans, mad theories, hurtling, jostled each other to pieces inside his head, until he felt as if it were on fire. Where they had gone! Who they were! What they were doing. Where to find them! Where to look!

He saw himself unearthing a political conspiracy. He beheld himself, triumphant, laughing at the editor who had said, "There's nothing in it." He saw himself, hand clasped in hand with the great man whom he worshipped, being congratulated and praised!

"A bigger thing than I thought," he said to himself. "Gollypots! It's the biggest thing of my life!"

Even as he said it there came wafted to him a pungent aroma as of spices and of strange perfumes, redolent of the Far East.

"*The coffin!*" He tore a match out of his pocket and struck it, and darted into the third little room.

There, in the middle of the room, a blaze of gold, magnificent in its lordly pomp, stood the bed in which one day a man would lie down to take his eternal rest.

"Gollypots!" He capered like a madman. "I was right! I was right! I was right!"

The match spluttered, flickered and went out.

He was alone with the coffin in the dark.

It was a situation in which few people, even those with the strongest nerves, would care to find themselves—underground, in a vast cellarage, for all he knew as intricate and far-stretching as a rabbit warren, in complete darkness and deadly silence, with the symbol of man's earthly end a few feet within his reach. Even those who pride themselves on their courage might have held themselves blameless if, under such conditions, their nerves had given way.

Dixon, however, was one of those happily constituted people who, given a certain amount of excitement, had not any nerves at all. He did not think of the darkness and the silence, or of being alone in a cellar. Bless your heart, he did not think of anything at all! He just skipped about there in that weird environment, simply mad with joy! He was so jolly pleased with himself, he had not time to give a thought to fear.

After a few seconds, however, his extraordinary exuberance of spirit abated. He wrenched his self-control back again, and summoned his common-sense to his aid. He

thrust his hand into his pocket, and drew out his little flash electric light, and proceeded to examine the room.

Had an artist been there, that light would have added just the final touch of perfection to the picture which it required. It flitted hither and thither, as he moved it, like a will-o'-the-wisp, now bringing out the shadowy outlines of the sarcophagus into strong relief, now blotting them out completely. What would that great master of light and shade, James Whistler, not have given to have seen Dixon's face, a perfect oval of golden light, as he bent over the coffin, examining it inside and out.

It was a gorgeous piece of work. Made of the finest cedar-wood—so at least he judged by the smell—the scarlet lacquer on it was wrought so finely that the polish of the surface was almost as if the whole thing were made of crimson glass. The ornamentations of golden birds, which to European eyes, accustomed to the sombre decorations of the West, might have appeared flamboyant in their gorgeous colouring, filled their place as a fit part of a unique whole, so perfectly harmonious was their accord with the colour scheme, and so exquisite were they in detailed design.

Mortimer Dixon, artist as he was by nature, bent over them in a transport of joy. Their symbolical value was as apparent to his quick intelligence as their true meaning, owing to his lack of specialised education, passed him by. The parti-coloured balls, the row of little golden figures sitting on ivory stools, the dragons rampant, with their jewelled eyes, the inset medallions painted on glass surrounded by precious stones, were sufficient evidence for him as to the real rank of the supposed "low washboy" as the Chinaman had deemed himself a few hours before. It did not need the peacock's feather, gleaming resplendent in greens and blues across the top of the coffin, to make him grasp the fact that he probably stood in the presence of a sarcophagus designed for one of China's greatest mandarins.

One thing, however, puzzled him : that was the round and open aperture at one end of the coffin lid. He surmised roughly that the circle was about the size of a man's face.

"What the devil is that for?" he asked himself grimly. Then he had one of his sudden inspirations.

He recalled having read many years before a description of the lying-in-state of a great Eastern potentate. In that

case, too, a portion of the coffin lid had been cut away, so that the great nobles, coming to take a last farewell glance at their lord, might salute him, so to speak, in the flesh for the last time.

He went hot all over. It all fitted in so wonderfully. It seemed too good to be true.

Suddenly a wave of intense curiosity rushed over him to see what it was like inside.

For a moment he hesitated. His innately delicate feeling made it seem like an act of sacrilege. But his curiosity got the better of him. After all, he argued with himself, a coffin's not a coffin until its purpose has been fulfilled. The entrance of the triumphant dead transforms it into a habitation of mystery and holy reverence. Until then, what *is* a coffin but a piece of painted wood!

He shifted his little lamp into his left hand, and endeavoured to open the lid. To his surprise it held fast.

He ran the light all over it, endeavouring to find the fastening, but in vain. In all that expanse of exquisite scarlet wood, so far as he could find, there was neither lock, nor key, nor hasp.

"But there must be an opening," he said to himself, seething with excitement. "They must put him in somehow," he stopped short—"unless he's in there already." Before he had realised what he was doing, he had thrust his hand down through the hole left open in the middle.

What he encountered was soft in substance, delicate in texture, but it was *not* the body of a man.

"Then how the deuce do they get him in?" he asked himself, more wild than ever to see what was inside. He lifted his hand to rumple his hair—a habit of his when perplexed; as his hand passed his face he almost fell flat with astonishment. The tips of his fingers were rose-pink, and the perfume which emanated from them brought Lady Macbeth's saying to his mind, when she instanced the perfume of Arabia as the most fragrant scent known to the world.

As is often the case in life, one finds a thing when one has ceased to look for it. So it was that, when he was looking at his hand, he found what he had searched for in vain—the way to open the lid. Two gold hands clasped together—so cleverly constructed that they appeared to form part of the ornate design—were merely the clasps which held in

their place the bands of gilt which ran round the entire coffin, holding the bottom to the lid.

Those clasped hands, so exquisite in workmanship, were further adorned on the third finger of the left hand by a jewelled ring. Fumbling about with delicate dexterity, and finding no way to unclasp the beautiful things, it suddenly occurred to him to press the stone in the ring. Instantly the hands sprang asunder and the gold bands were loose.

"Gollypots!" he said to himself, grinning like a schoolboy. "I feel like Aladdin when he found the lamp!"

In another instant he had the coffin lid open and was gazing inside.

CHAPTER XIV

IF the outside of the sarcophagus was beautiful, the inside was more beautiful still. It was entirely encased in ivory, on which, on small plaques, were painted episodes and scenes evidently relating to the history of the man for whom the casket was designed; probably to perpetuate his glorification as, in the days of Egypt, the Pharaohs had perpetuated the deeds of their kings.

Down the extreme centre lay a soft and narrow quilt of padded silk. At the head was a small bolster of the same silk, embroidered with a peacock's feather and gathered at either end into a button, which, Dixon's knowledge of Chinese customs was sufficient to tell him, was merely another proof of the rank of the man whose body it was designed to hold. On the bolster lay a small handkerchief embroidered in gold. It was so fine that, until he actually touched it, he took it to be made of lace. The three hasps of the lid were held in place by hinges of heavily jewelled gold.

Enchanted by the perfection of the thing before him, he stood so lost in thought that he heeded the passing of time no more than he bothered himself with wondering how he should swing himself out of the cellar, now that the steps had gone.

He just stood there, giving his whole soul to the matter in hand to the exclusion of everything else.

If the genie of the lamp of Aladdin had really appeared to

him at that moment and asked him to formulate his desire, the thing he would have asked for would have been that the Plump Little Party—whose existence he had completely forgotten—might come and see the coffin too.

That elation of spirit, which is the gift of the gods to the few, and for the possession of which so terrible a price has to be paid, was given in full measure, pressed down and overflowing, to this young Englishman as he stood in that horrible cellar, flashing his two-and-sixpenny electric light over that exquisite coffin, savouring his triumph to the full.

At that instant he became aware of a curious sound.

There was not much uplifting about Mortimer Dixon then. He "doused his glim," in burglar's parlance, and stood there in the pitch dark, listening with all his might.

It was a very little sound—a little grating sound that might well have been made by a mouse. But he did not deceive himself for a minute. The noise was not made by a mouse, but by men.

He jumped at his conclusion as quickly as he flashed off the light.

"They are coming to fetch the coffin. I have no time to get away before they find me. Where shall I hide?"

He stood in the dark and strained every nerve to listen.

The little grating noise got louder and louder, then it suddenly ceased.

Could it have been a mouse?

A little chink of light, so small, so faint, that it was hardly noticeable, appeared on the wall in front of him.

He was answered.

It was *not* a mouse.

"That is not the wall where the opening is," he told himself. "Then there must be another entrance. The whole thing's a gigantic fake, as I guessed from the very beginning. Where the devil shall I hide?"

Where indeed! The place was pitch dark. If he ran in the darkness he might run into them. If he showed a light, they would see him. Worse still, if they showed a light—as show a light they would—there was no hope for him.

"They'll kill me like a rat if they find me. I'm as good as dead already. Where the devil shall I hide?"

Then the inspiration of his life came to him. "The only place for a dead man to hide is in a coffin," he said to himself.

As he slipped into the sarcophagus and pulled the lid down, so extraordinary was the temperament of the man, I give you my word, he actually laughed.

He did not laugh long as he heard the clasps hasping themselves together.

At the ominous clicking an agony of emotion rushed over him, impossible to describe.

It did not last long, however. Like a spasm of physical pain it tore at him, and, as suddenly, passed away.

"They can't do more than kill me," he said to himself grimly. "It's a damn' nuisance, but if my time's come to die, it's no good worrying, die I must." So he gathered his forces together, and lay there full length at his ease. The padded silk was as luxurious a couch as ever he had lain on. The bolster for his head was exactly the height he liked, although it was a trifle hard. His face, completely uncovered, enabled him to inhale the cool and subterranean air as well as when he had stood on his feet. As far as physical comfort went, he had nothing to complain of but the smell.

Oh, that smell! The cedars of Lebanon, the orange-trees of Tangiers, the ambergris of the Arabian bazaars, and the conglomerated smells of Bond Street and the Rue de Rivoli were not in it. To the end of his life he never could touch cloves or nutmeg.

"I feel like a Christmas pudding before it's cooked," he told himself. "Oh, gollypots, gollypots! what an ass I am!"

Alas for Mortimer Dixon! heaven-gifted genius, and most ambitious young journalist in Fleet Street! Never did pearl of wisdom drop from sage's lips more wise than that simple truth from his, when he called himself an ass.

Consider for a moment the situation. A living man locked in a coffin, stored away in a cellar, with no possible means of attracting attention, and no possible means of getting out himself. Hideous enough, when you come to think of it, is it not? But Mortimer Dixon did *not* think of it. To him it was all part of the adventure. It was his only chance of escape, and he chanced it, as he had chanced other things a hundred times before. He shut his mind deliberately to all the frightful possibilities that might have assailed a lesser man. Starvation, suffocation, madness! He put them all from him with a hand of iron and, cool as a cucumber, lay there in the darkness and waited.

The grating noise grew louder, then ceased.

There was a horrible pause.

After what seemed to him an eternity, it began again.

Then once again it ceased.

"God!" said Dixon to himself, and this was the only moment that his courage failed him. "It isn't a mouse! It's a rat!"

In that instant, in his imagination, he died a thousand deaths.

"They'll find me out and eat me."

The mere thought of such a hideous possibility, the contact of the unclean animals scenting out their victim, made his hot young blood run cold. The sweat poured down his face as he lay in his prison. He put up his hand to wipe it, and the smell on his own fingers revolted him almost past bearing.

To die in the open in a clean, fair fight is one thing; to perish untimely in a foul cellar, devoured by vermin, is another. His wholesome English body, reeking of spices, writhed at the thought of it. This would not be death, but his idea of hell.

Then, like a message from God, came the thought of that little chink of light on the wall.

"Ass!" he said to himself. "Oh, you blithering, blithering ass! Do rats carry lights in their tails?" His spirits went up with a bound. As long as he had got to do with men, he did not care—he knew he could hold his own. Incredible as it may seem, from that instant, he never feared the final issue of his adventure again.

The grating noise recommenced, louder than before.

He lay and listened, all his life concentrating itself in his ears. Once again there was silence, and then the turning of a key.

"The wall isn't a wall. It's a door made out of the stones. Clever beasts! Instead of gaping at this pudding basin, I ought to have been examining those walls."

He held his breath, and lay listening.

Suddenly a light appeared.

What kind of a light it was, candle or gas or lamp, he neither knew nor cared. It was good enough for him that it *was* a light.

Another pause, and then a movement so faint that it could hardly be called a sound.

"They're coming," said he, chortling to himself. "They're coming to fetch the coffin, bless 'em. I shall see the whole beastly lot at my ease." He stopped short, and his eyes dilated in the darkness. "Ye gods! if I can see them through the hole, they can see me."

Instantly he thought of the lace handkerchief. "It's put in to cover his face with, so that the common lot mayn't see him." He wriggled about, feeling softly until he found it. Then he popped the thing over his face. "I'll stink worse than ever," he said to himself, chuckling.

His spirits rose higher and higher. "Gollypots! gollypots! gollypots!" he exulted, "what a clever ass I am!"

The ass part of the business is an open question, but clever he undoubtedly was, which was just as well for him under the circumstances, for, in another minute, the light grew stronger, there was a shuffling sound as of men groping forward on their stockinged feet, and, through the chinks of the lace handkerchief, Dixon beheld four Chinese faces bending over the aperture in the coffin, all of them bearing traces of terrible grief.

"I've often wondered why the Chinese don't kiss each other," he said to himself, "but I'm jolly glad they don't. If all those tears were to fall on me, I should be drowned." It suddenly occurred to him to wonder what on earth they were so unhappy about. "If they're so miserable at seeing his coffin, what on earth will they be like when he's dead."

The four weird faces with their oblique eyebrows and inscrutable eyes suddenly vanished. There was a stealthy sound as of some movement. Then all was once again still.

"What on earth are they doing?" he asked himself.

As if in answer to his question, there arose a faint murmur as of four voices speaking in unison. A murmuring, a pattering of words, in a kind of sing-song monotony, which puzzled Dixon. "What on earth were they at?"

Suddenly an illuminating idea flashed across him, which appealed to him so strongly that he found himself struggling to poke his head through the hole to see for himself if he was right. "They're praying for *me*," he told himself delightedly.

He was right once more. The four Chinamen, grouped around the coffin, were reciting the prayers for the dead.

"Pray away, my little lambkins!" he whispered to him-

self, his buoyancy rising at that sound. "Only, for heaven's sake, don't pray too long, for, though it's mighty comfortable here, I want to get out."

There is no doubt about it, Mortimer Dixon's temperament *was* a gift of the gods. That he might be left alone in the cellar after they had finished their praying never occurred to him. That they might never discover their mistake and bury him alive was a possibility which he thrust aside as a child thrusts aside a toy he has no use for. That they might find out their error and immediately kill him he refused to consider even as a possible contingency.

"I said the laundry was a blind. It was. I said the Chinaman was not a common Chink. He was not. I said the laundry was going to-night. It's gone. I said they'd come and fetch the coffin. Well, they've come." In the midst of his triumphant argument he pulled himself up short. "If these men who know him think he's dead, why isn't *he* inside this coffin instead of me?"

His heart began to beat like a sledge-hammer. "They'll find out the minute they lift the damned thing. Heavy as it is, you can't chuck eleven stone three in, as a bit of make-weight, without drawing attention to the fact."

The sing-song ceased, and, judging from their movements, the men were rising to their feet. There was a shuffling, a subdued, murmuring, a moving, a shifting, a heaving, and he felt himself hoisted into the air. Once again he had triumphed. They were taking the coffin away.

The instant the coffin began to move he snatched the handkerchief off his face. From the position in which he lay it was of course impossible for him to see anything but what passed just above his eyes. But he judged by the shifting of the light, its waning and its deepening, that a man in front was carrying a lamp, by the light of which the men carrying the coffin moved.

Never, as long as he lives, will Mortimer Dixon forget that experience.

The journey seemed endless. The swaying movement as the men made their difficult way along the passages made him sick. He had heard of the queer sensations induced by a palanquin, and he had experienced for himself the horrible rolling of the "ship of the desert," in a short journey he had made on a camel's back in Algiers. That last experience remained a bitter memory, for it had entirely

spoilt his pleasure for the rest of the day. It was, however, nothing compared to the misery he endured as, in a coffin, which had probably cost thousands of pounds, he was carried shoulder-high, in the bowels of the earth, through a London cellarage, which must have extended for miles.

Sometimes they went quickly, almost at a run, Sometimes they went so slowly that he found it all he could do not to shriek to them to stop. Once they bumped into a corner, and the soft murmuring rose into an excited shrill whispering; from the shifting of the light to an oblique position he gathered they were anxiously examining what injury had been done. But this, bad as it was, was endurable. The unendurable torment began when they shifted the coffin, so that at one moment his feet were almost in perpendicular position, and the next he was almost standing on his head.

“Now, they’re going down the steps,” he said to himself as his shoulders rose, “and now, ye gods and little fishes! they’re going up. Talk of Chinese tortures indeed! If they want a little novelty in that line for Christmas, I should advise them to try this.”

It seemed to him that he had been proceeding on this terrible journey for years, when suddenly the men drew up with a jerk. There was a sound of knocking. There was a sound as of a heavy door opening. His straining ears caught a new falsetto in the voices murmuring beneath him, and he judged rightly that his journey was at an end. After a second delay, the men moved forward again, and he barely had the presence of mind to snatch the gold handkerchief back into its position over his face when there was an awful swaying and bumping, and the coffin was set down.

Cautiously opening an eye, he knew, at once, by the freshness of the air, that they were no longer under the ground, but in an airy, well-ventilated room.

Looking above him, he could distinguish a glittering chandelier of cut-glass. From its size and the elegance of its outline, he jumped at the further conclusion that the destination of the coffin was the mansion of someone who was rich. Further than this he could tell nothing, except that the increased murmuring suggested many presences, and that some heated discussion was going forward, rather than the reverential whispering which is the usual form of conversation in the presence of the dead.

Suddenly, to his horror, through the meshes of the gold lace, he saw a face bending over him, looking intently through the hole. His heart literally stood still within him, so great was the unexpected shock. Nearer and nearer bent the face, until he could distinguish the sinister intelligence of the oblique eye. He held his breath and his blood seemed turned to ice within him as something soft and chill descended on his mouth. The next moment he had his work cut out to prevent himself from laughing. "Gollypots!" he cried to himself. "If the ugly beast isn't *kissing* me!"

The touch was withdrawn. He blinked upwards, and a second face presented itself through the aperture, bent down and repeated the operation. Dixon nearly had a fit.

"How many more," he said to himself in a panic. He opened his eyes again, and again saw the second face withdrawn, and the third descending upon him. "I thought the Chinese never kissed each other. I wish to God they didn't."

A fourth face bent over him. A fifth. A sixth. A seventh. An eighth. In such quick succession that he had hardly time to breathe.

Suddenly the peculiar smell of the Asiatic, the terror of his position, and the horror of those faces bending over him and kissing him was too much for him! The light seemed to grow brighter and brighter, the odour seemed to grow stronger and stronger, the horror seemed to get greater and greater; for the second time in his life, he fainted away.

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Dixon came to himself, he was lying, as he had lain when he had lost consciousness, with his head on the highly spiced bolster, and his face covered with the poignantly perfumed lace. The ceremony of the kissing was over.

One thing, however, was changed. The light from the chandelier above him was extinguished, and there was no sound of voices in the room.

For a long time he lay and considered his position, and the more he considered it the worse it seemed to get. His coolness had not deserted him, but his physical strength, owing to the long strain he had undergone, was impaired.

He was cramped from lying so long in the one position. He was nauseated to the point of agony with the smell of the spice. He could have drunk a barrellful of beer at a sitting. He would have given a year of his life for a good, solid meal.

So wonderful is the mingling of humour and tragedy in this world of ours, the unhappy Mortimer wanted to blow his nose. When this last desire of his made itself apparent to his returning consciousness, so keen was his sense of humour, even at that terrific moment of his career, that, before he knew what he was doing, he had laughed aloud. The mere sound of his own cachinnations frightened him so that he nearly fainted again. He caught his breath and listened with all his ears, the blood bounding through his body, so that he could hear his own pulsations beating almost as loudly as the ticking of a clock.

Apparently, however, no harm was done, for there was not a sound in the room. For one awful moment he thought he had been taken back to the cellar; then his common-sense came to his aid. "They wouldn't have dragged me all this way in order to take me back again," he said to himself. "You can bet your boots that that kissing meant taking a last, long farewell. I'm lying-in-state! I'm in some God-forsaken palace belonging to the man who ought to be where I am; and, O ye gods and little fishes! how I wish he were!"

He put up his hand and softly plucked the handkerchief off his face. It was true that the brilliant light above him was extinguished, but the room was not in darkness. A pale, greenish light flickered around and above him, but where it came from he could not determine. Anyway, it shifted in rhythmic intervals, and he came to the conclusion that it must fall from a lamp suspended from a bracket so delicately poised that it answered to the slightest deviation of the air. "There must be a strong draught to make that light flicker about so," he told himself. "I must be in a room where there is an open door, or perhaps I'm in a church!"

Hardly had he come to that conclusion when a voice fell on his ears.

It was the voice of a woman speaking in English. It was a woman evidently in great distress. So interspersed was it with the sound of another voice, a man's voice alter-

nately pleading and commanding, and a woman's tears and sobs, that in the confusion of his own situation he could not make out distinctly what was being said. He would have given his right hand to have been able to join in that discussion, but, as it was, all he could do was to lie still and listen. To save his own life, further than to touch his face, he could not have moved his hand an inch.

Suddenly the woman stopped sobbing, and her voice rose clear and calm. "I won't eat your beastly food. I won't drink your beastly wine. I won't do your beastly work. Why am I kept a prisoner here? Where am I? Who are you? You're not the man I agreed to work for? Where is *he*? For all I know, that food may be poisoned, and that wine may be drugged! Why don't you let me go? I've done you no harm." The voice fell, and Dixon, clenching his hands, told himself that the speaker had again burst into a passion of weeping. "I want to go home," he caught; "I want to go home."

"Decidedly," Dixon told himself "I'm *not* in church."

There followed an interregnum of silence, broken only by the sound of the woman's sobs. Then the man's voice began to speak again. It was pitched so low, and the intonation was so foreign, that, though he knew at once from its indefinable quality it was a Chinese who was speaking, try as he would, Dixon could not distinguish a word.

Then the girl began speaking again. "If I do your work, I may go?" she cried passionately. "You told me that yesterday. You told me that the day before. I have done what you have told me, then why haven't you kept your word and let me go? I'll come back and do your work if you will let me go home and see my mother. He promised to send to my mother. How do I know he has? If you've deceived me in one thing, why not in another!"

"God in heaven!" Dixon said to himself. "*The missing girl!*"

The discovery came to him with such violence that for a moment he was oblivious of everything else. He lay there in the intoxicating darkness, and his head whirled round and round and round. That very night he had given his solemn promise to the heart-broken mother to find her daughter, and here he was, brought by some mysterious power mightier than himself, lying helpless, a prisoner, within a few feet of the girl. He could have shouted aloud

in triumph, so great was his excitement. His dare-devil bravado had justified itself. His keen powers of reasoning had led him to the spot. He felt as a man might feel who had constructed in his own mind a marvellous engine, and who suddenly found himself standing with his dream realised in steel and iron beneath him, and the throttle in his hand. Straight and sure as an arrow sped from the skilled bow of an archer he had winged his way to the game he quarried, and laid his hand on its pulsing heart. The sharp shutting of a door put to an end these fine imaginings. He pricked up his ears and listened. There was not a sound.

Then it was that the knowledge of his own impotency came upon him in its full force. He writhed in anguish at the thought of his own helplessness. Here he was, in the very place he desired to be. Here was the girl half London was agog to find. Here he was, in the very centre of the mystery, and he could not do a thing. He was locked into a box, safe and secure as if he had been dead and buried in some mysterious temple of Buddha, thousands of miles away, in the niche for which this gorgeous prison-house of his was designed.

At the shutting of the door, he could have raved and screamed like a hysterical girl, but his common-sense asserted itself very soon. If he shouted and yelled until he was hoarse, how would it profit either him or the girl? They would not have let him out. She could not have let him out. And what help would his cursings and wailings have been to her.

"I haven't been led here for nothing," he said to himself, with one of those strange flashes of intuitive reverence for the God he worshipped so devoutly, in his own peculiar way. "There's some purpose in all this. I've been brought here to save this girl, and save this girl I shall. Show me a way out of this, O God, who hast brought me here." His very soul was consumed in a passion of prayer.

As if in answer to that agonised crying a new sound fell on his ears. Tip-tap, tip-tap, tip-tap-tap. It was the commonplace striking of the keys of the typewriter. To Dixon, in his coffin, it came more sweetly than the sound of the harping of the divine singer Israfel.

Tip-tap, tip-tap, tip-tap-tap.

"If only I could see whether the brute is still with her."

But he could see nothing save the light flickering as it shifted to and fro.

Tip-tap, tip-tap, tip-tap-tap. Then a pause and the sound of a woman's soft crying.

"The brute's there," he said to himself.

"Oh, mother, mother, mother," moaned the soft voice.

"No, he's not."

Now was the moment to attract her attention. Now was the happy instant which, if successful, might lead to his escape; but how to do it? He pursed up his lips and tried to whistle. His lips were so parched not a sound would come. He knocked softly on the inner lid of the coffin. The clacking of the machine, which she had again began working, drowned the noise.

He tried to call. His nerves did not fail him, but his voice did. "I'll get out of this if I die for it," he said savagely. He seized the lace handkerchief and sniffed at it for all he was worth. The spices acted on his mucous membrane like a strong irritant.

He sneezed.

He sneezed once. He sneezed twice. He sneezed three times.

At the third sneeze the typewriter stopped. He heard the pushing back of a chair, and the rustle of a woman's dress.

"What was that?" said a soft voice, quivering with alarm.

For answer he sneezed again.

"Who's there? What is it? Who sneezed?"

Accurately, as though he had seen it with his visible eyes, he heard the door, which divided him from the girl, pushed open.

"Is there anyone there?" said the soft voice, with a note of terror in it. "Oh, I'm so terrified!"

"Don't be terrified," said Dixon hoarsely.

Strung up as he was, he could feel the girl jump as he spoke.

"Oh, who is it? What is it? Where are you?"

"I'm here," said Dixon faintly.

"Here? Where?"

"In the coffin. For heaven's sake don't talk so loud."

As if reassured by the sound of a man's voice speaking in English he felt, rather than heard, the girl drawing nearer.

“Where are you? I can't see you?”

“I can't help that. I'm here.”

Following the sound of his voice, the girl's eye must have been directed to the aperture in the coffin lid, for, an instant later, a shadow obtruded itself between his eye and the light, and he could feel the soft breath of the girl as she bent over him.

“My God!” she said. “Who are you?”

Said Dixon regardless of grammar: “It's me.”

The girl must have backed away, for the light fell across his eyes again.

“Don't be afraid,” he whispered. “It's all right.” His quick brain told him the best way to reassure her. “I'm here to rescue you.”

“Oh, thank God! Thank God! Tell me quick, who are you?”

“I'm Mortimer Dixon. I'm a journalist. Your mother came to see me this evening, and I've come here to get you out.”

Again the light was obstructed and he knew that the excited girl was bending over him.

“But why are you in this coffin?”

“Because I can't get out.” He grinned as he said it. At the mere possibility of rescue, he was his buoyant dare-devil self again.

“Oh, how frightful! I'm terrified to death! They'll kill you!” The soft words fell pattering from her mouth above him almost like drops of rain.

“They won't do anything of the kind,” he said roughly, “unless you behave like a silly little idiot!”

The brutality of the expression served the end he had in view; and he knew that his instinct had served him rightly when he heard by the sound of her voice that her vanity had been touched.

“Tell me what I'm to do?”

“First tell me when that brute will be back.”

“In about ten minutes, to see if I've done what he wants.”

“What does he want done?”

“Some letters typed.”

“Good. Now listen to me. You go back into the next room and type for all you're worth. Tell him when he comes, if he chooses to give you his word of honour that he'll let you

go back when the work is finished, you'll type all the work he wants. Understand?"

"Yes."

"The instant he has gone, lock the door, and come back here to me."

"I'll come." The face was withdrawn, and Dixon could hear the soft rustling of her dress moving again.

"Hold hard!" he called softly to her. "Didn't I hear you say just now you'd got something to eat?"

"Yes, heaps."

"Then, for goodness' sake, give me some."

"But it may be poisoned."

"Bosh! Got any wine?"

"Yes, a whole decanter."

"Then bring me a glass."

"But it may be drugged."

"Rats! Buck up and get it."

The girl vanished, and he was left alone.

"Bring one of your sheets of paper and twist it up into a funnel," he called after her softly, "else I'll choke."

In less than a minute she was back again.

"There's chicken and ham and cold fish, and bits of stuff done up in jelly," she whispered. "What will you have?"

"All I can get," said Dixon. "First give me some wine, my throat is parched." She bent over him, and Dixon, parting his lips, felt a screw of paper inserted in his mouth.

"Go slow," he told her. "Drop by drop."

The wine was a good brand of Burgundy but, to him, it tasted like nectar drunk by the gods in Paradise. It was like drinking in new life.

"Shove the food in here and go back to your typing," he commanded her, "and put the empty glass down by your side."

There is no doubt about it, modern women are wonderful when it comes to dealing with situations. The girl's hand had been perfectly steady as, delicately, drop by drop, she poured the wine through the funnel down Dixon's throat. The pieces of food she thrust through the aperture were small enough to be held in one hand.

If the wine had been nectar, the chicken was ambrosia.

Tip-tap, tip-tap, tip-tap-tap.

The sound of the typewriter, clicking its accompaniment to Dixon nibbling his chicken wing in the coffin, sounded

finer to him than the strains of the Blue Hungarian Band as an accompaniment to a twenty-course dinner at the Savoy.

Suddenly the typewriter stopped clacking. Then came a sound of foreign voices and the girl answering them quietly. Then the door was shut. Once again Mortimer Dixon was shut off from the outer world, but this time, so potent was the effect of the chicken and the wine, he was quite unperturbed.

"I don't care a damn," he said to himself, happily gnawing at the chicken bone. "I've had something to drink, I've had something to eat, and I'm perfectly certain that girl will come back. The food isn't poisoned because they still want to use her. I'm in the place I wanted to be; I've had a good meal; and I've found what I started out to look for. This thing's going to turn out O.K., or I'm a Chinaman! I wonder if I shall find I've grown a pigtail when I get out of this!"

Oddly enough, it never occurred to him that he was not going to get out.

From the moment the girl spoke to him, he never felt an instant's doubt as to the final result of this mad adventure of his. "They can jaw away all night for all I care," he told himself, licking his lips like a cat. "That girl's a regular Trojan. If she's as pretty as she's plucky, that 'rotter' of hers ought to turn up trumps." He yawned prodigiously. "Gollypots! but I'm done for. For two pins I'd go to sleep."

History does not relate whether the two pins were forthcoming, but certain it is that he went to sleep. This seems, of course, incredible. But, when you come to think of it, it is not any more amazing than the things men do, in the face of danger, every day.

Men who jump into fathomless waters and rescue a stranger whom they have never spoken to in their lives! Men who ride back into the jaws of almost certain death, and coolly return with a comrade they have no special liking for, under a rain of living fire. Men like the Great Lafayette, who went back from certain safety, with a gay smile on his face, into a living hell of fire, on the off-chance of saving a favourite horse. Men who risk their lives every instant of the day, all over the world, for the sake of something which appeals to them, no matter how terrible the possible consequences, without a moment's thought.

So it was with Mortimer Dixon.

He was one of those nameless heroes who, in common with those other great souls, risked his life gaily in the most matter-of-fact, prosaic way. But, the danger over, his buoyant temperament rose like a bird fresh from its nest. It was literally the plain truth when he said to himself, "I don't care a damn what happens! For two pins I'd go to sleep." Barely were the words out of his mouth than he had snuggled his head a little closer on the bolster, shut his eyes and was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XVI

THE next thing Dixon knew was something soft touching his face; his subconscious brain must have been working during his sleep for, though he woke with a start, he retained sufficient self-control to lie perfectly still. At first he thought that the ceremony of kissing had begun again, to his unspeakable disgust, but he was speedily reassured by hearing a soft voice moaning above him: "Oh dear, oh dear, poor fellow, he's fainted or dead. What *shall* I do?"

"Dead, am I!" he cried; and at the sound of his voice, fresh and clear, the girl dropped back the handkerchief over his face and nearly screamed.

"You aren't dead?" she gasped.

"Just put your hand in here, and I'll show you whether I'm dead," he returned gaily.

The small soft fingers fluttered resolutely through the lid in the coffin, and he caught hold of them and pressed them to his lips. "A dead Englishman is better than a live Chinaman anyway," he told her in a gay whisper. "Now, you little Trojan, be quick and let me out."

"How does the coffin open?"

"You see those gilt hands, three pairs of them, clasped at different intervals."

"Yes."

"There's a ring on each of the left fingers. See them?"

"Yes."

"Press them quick and the coffin will open." There was a soft rustling movement and he knew that her hands were eagerly striving to open the doors of his prison-house.

"Wait a second," he whispered to her. "Is there anything on top of the coffin?"

"Yes, there's something burning in little saucers."

"I thought as much," he said triumphantly, pleased even at that terrible moment, with the assurance of his own perspicacity. "I'd trust my nose anywhere. I *knew* there was another beastly stink! Take the saucers off, and put them down carefully on the table before you open the coffin," he said to her.

"You must have a pretty good nerve," said the girl. "I should never have thought of that."

"I'm paid to think," said Dixon, who was enjoying himself immensely. "What are you waiting for? Why don't you hurry up?"

"I *am* hurrying up, but the thing won't open."

"Bosh! Why don't you turn the stones."

"I *have* turned them." The girl's voice had changed, and he knew, although he was not able to see her, that she was trembling from head to foot.

"Press harder."

There was a pause. Then a little faint voice said: "I'm pressing as hard as I can."

The reaction from the certainty of safety to the terror of a danger he had never reckoned on was almost too much for him. But it was not his business to let the girl know that. He pulled himself together with an iron hand and said quietly in a most matter-of-fact voice: "Don't get flustered, you little idiot! It's all right. I know, for I've opened it myself. Now, listen to me quietly again. There are three pairs of hands . . ."

"I know that."

"And on each of those hands there is a ring with a stone in."

"Yes, I know; you told me all that before."

"You press that stone, and the lid opens."

"I've pressed the stones, and the lid *doesn't* open."

"You've pressed as hard as you know how?"

"Yes."

"And the lid doesn't move?"

"No, it doesn't move."

It is not any discredit to Mortimer Dixon to say that, at that horrible moment, the sweat poured down his face like rain. Then a sudden inspiration came to him. "Golly-

pots!" he called out in an excited whisper, "the Chinese do everything backwards, of course. Turn them the other way."

The girl did so. The stones turned. The hands unclasped. The coffin lid lifted itself; he put his long legs over the side, and hoisted himself to a sitting position.

In another moment he was out.

If you believe me, the first thing the girl snapped at him was: "Why didn't you tell me that the stones worked left-handed?"

"I never thought of it," he answered her hotly. "I'm left-handed myself."

Then the pair of handsome young lunatics stared at each other, and began to laugh. Yes, there, in that room of silence and mystery, shrouded in shadows, with the symbol of death lying close beside them, the girl snatched away from her kind, a helpless victim going in fear of her life and her honour in the midst of strange men, and the man snatched from the very jaws of worse than death, a long-drawn-out agony of threatened starvation and suffocation—there in that room, the two of them joined hands and laughed. The girl from threatening hysterics, the man from pure joy at once again feeling himself in touch with dear life.

Then they both stopped laughing as suddenly as they began.

"How long have you been in that thing?" the girl asked him.

Dixon took out his watch and looked at it. It was a quarter past twelve. "About two hours."

"Two hours!" The girl let his hand drop in sheer amazement. "And you can laugh about it. What a nerve you must have!"

He began to laugh again. "What price you?"

"Oh, I," she shrugged her shoulders. "I was different. I was furious at being kept here against my will. But, still, I knew well enough I was not in any danger. They were too afraid of *him*."

"Who's him?"

"The man I used to type for."

"You mean the Chinaman who kept the laundry at Whitechapel, and had the little room where you went to work?"

She nodded. "He isn't really a laundryman, you know."

Then she caught herself up and bit her lips. "I oughtn't to have said that."

"Why not?"

"I promised him not to." She looked helplessly at Dixon. "These horrid men are hateful. I wouldn't have come here at all if it hadn't been for him."

"Do you know where we are?" He asked her, curious to hear her reply.

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"How did you come here, then?"

"They brought me. The Saturday morning when mother went round to the ironmonger's and found out about me—that I was working for *him*—I knew there'd be an awful row, so, first thing in the morning, I started a little earlier than usual, and slipped round, thinking to warn him. Of course it would have been a fearful thing for him if he'd been found out."

"Of course," said Dixon dryly. "Well, what happened?"

"When I got there, they told me he hadn't been there that night. I went up to his room all the same. I thought I'd type a line telling him mother had found out. There were two men in his room. They said they were waiting for me to come. They brought me a message from him—a letter in his own handwriting."

"How do you know it was his own handwriting?"

"I'd seen it dozens of times. He used to leave messages for me constantly—telling me what to do in case he couldn't come himself."

"I see. Well, what did the letter tell you?"

"It said I was to go with those two men. He said that there was something special he wanted me to do—you see he knew he could trust me, and if I'd go and stay as long as he wanted me he'd give me twenty pounds a week. Of course, I never hesitated a moment. I went with them at once. There was a motor car waiting round the corner, and we got in."

"But it was daylight. Why didn't you see where you went?"

The girl's voice changed again as it had done before. "They had some chocolates with them, and I ate one. It must have been drugged. I knew nothing from that moment until I woke up, and found myself here."

"That must have frightened you badly?"

The girl shook her head. "No, it didn't. Why should it? I knew I was all right. *He* was here."

"I suppose you're in love with this *him* you speak of?"

The girl threw back her head and laughed. "Silly! he's old enough to be my grandfather. Besides, he's Chinese."

"I should have said, I suppose, that he's in love with you."

"It wouldn't be any good if he were," she returned.

"I'm engaged to another man."

"You might at least have let your mother know where you had gone."

"What do you mean?" the girl flashed out passionately.

"Of course I did."

"She has heard nothing."

"But I wrote that very same day. I wrote it on the typewriter, and gave it to one of them. He promised me he would post the letter himself."

"Then he didn't keep his promise," said Mortimer Dixon dryly. "Your mother has heard nothing of you from the time you left the house."

The girl's soft hands clutched at him in the darkness. "But if he didn't post the letter, then my mother doesn't know where I am!"

"She hasn't an idea."

"My God!"

"Scotland Yard has been turned upside down trying to find you. The papers have been full of nothing else but your disappearance for a week."

"What do I care about Scotland Yard, and papers? I'm thinking of my mother. Oh, what can she be thinking! She must be nearly mad."

"She is."

The girl reeled, and Dixon thrilled with the soft falling of her tears.

"Oh, take me away quick! Take me back home. I won't stay here any longer, not even for him. I thought he was so nice. I liked him so much. I trusted him entirely. He was always so kind to me, and he hasn't even posted my letter, though I told him what a state she'd be in. I won't stay in this horrible place another minute. I want to go home to my mother. Oh, come along and take me out of this quick."

She dragged Dixon by the sheer force of her emotion to the folding doors, and they stood together in the other room. The light from the lamps fell on her, and for the first time he caught sight of her face. He was simply dumbfounded. The girl was exquisitely beautiful. Pretty was not the word for it.

"Come along, do," said the girl, snatching some papers and laying them together. "What are you staring at?"

"At you." For the life of him Dixon could not help himself. As usual he overflowed. "Your mother told me you were a pretty girl, but I didn't expect anything like this."

The girl stared at him with her brilliant eyes. "You haven't anything much to complain of in that way yourself."

The danger, the excitement, the reaction, the exotic surroundings and the girl's exquisite face and eyes caught him in a whirlpool of emotion and, for the second time within twenty-four hours, that strong beast which he thought so securely chained came out from his hiding place and hurled himself against the gate that guarded the fair house of Mortimer Dixon's integrity of soul. Another instant, and he would have kissed her, and stained the spotless code of honour that he had set up for himself the day he became engaged. But the gods were good to him; the sound of a shutting door and a shuffling step chilled his hot blood. "Somebody's coming," he whispered, and pushed her sharply from him. "Go back to your place and begin to type."

Tip-tap, tip-tap, tip-tap-tap went the machine, and Dixon, who had noiselessly stepped back into the other room, stood in the darkness and listened with all his ears.

And as he stood there, for the first time in his life he began to realise what kind of a man he really was. A vision of his inner life passed before him, and he saw himself headstrong to obstinacy, daring to recklessness, weak where he thought himself strong. He told himself, with remorse almost unbearable, that, at the moment when he ought to have been offering prayer and thanksgiving for his deliverance, thinking of the joy his escape would mean to the woman who loved him, he had almost fallen an easy prey to the tempter, on the very doorstep of death itself.

He stood there in the darkness and learned a very bitter lesson about himself. "Better for me I were lying dead in that man's coffin than that I should live to become that

intolerable indignity, a man who is not master of himself." Then and there he renewed his vows made to himself. Then and there he dedicated himself afresh to the service of that beautiful and lovely ideal which the ignorant call Folly, and the wise call God.

Yes, it was a strange and mysterious spiritual experience that came to Dixon in that hour. As long as he lived, he never forgot it, any more than he ever forgot the room in which it came.

The panelled walls, emblazoned in scarlet and gold; the curtains and hangings of blue silk; the twelve ivory stools that enclosed the coffin in a magic ring. Beholding them, his heart leapt within him. Twelve stools, and the man in the coffin in the centre made thirteen!

Thirteen was his lucky number. It seemed to pursue him on whatever adventure he went.

At the head of the coffin stood a Buddha, prototype of silence, god of eternal rest. The green light from the green lamp fell across the idol's enigmatic countenance, and it seemed to him that there was a strange understanding of the passions and sins and upward strivings of little humanity in his jewelled eyes. Often and often in the days to come, in moments of great stress and emotion, beset with danger on the one hand and death on the other, the thought of those twelve stools, the empty coffin and the waiting girl, came back to him and made him strong in the hour of weakness; supreme in the hour of temptation, and helped him to hold fast to his soul's salvation and his vow.

CHAPTER XVII

It was a very humble and chastened Mortimer Dixon who, when the typewriter ceased and the girl called him softly, answered her call. The girl, quick herself, gauged the change in him in her own feminine way, and wondered what it might mean.

"Something has happened to you in there," she said to him. "What's the matter? You're changed?"

"I am," said Dixon quietly.

"I knew it the minute I set eyes on you. What is it?"

He caught her brilliant glance, and held it steadily with

his own. "I was mad when I went into that room," he said quietly. "Now I am sane."

A silence fell between them. The girl did not ask what he meant by the saying, nor did he tell her. Perhaps she understood. Perhaps she did not. Perhaps—Dixon always liked to think it was so—she, too, had been mad, and she, too, had become sane. Perhaps, in the exercise of her commonplace calling, the click-clacking of the typewriter may have called across the abyss of eternity to her soul, even as the silent Buddha and the empty coffin had called to his. Who shall say through what medium the message of our higher life calls to our lower? What limit shall man place upon the possibilities of God?

Be that as it may, these two looked at each other in silence, and they knew, without any saying, that the moment of their mutual danger was passed.

"I've told them that I'm going to do the work they've left me. There's a good two hours of typing. What are you going to do?"

"It seems a beast of a thing to do," he answered her, "but I'm going to leave you here." He paused, that the meaning of his words might sink into her mind. To his delight, but not to his surprise, she neither fell back from him, nor did her eyes flinch. "If *you* try to get out, they'll miss you. They don't know I'm here, so if I try to get out they won't miss me. I think I can help you more by going alone, but, if you prefer, we'll risk it, and I'll take you along."

Without an instant's hesitation the girl answered: "I'll stay here."

"Good. I thought you would before I asked." He put out his hand and she took it, and they stood for a moment, cementing the beginning of a friendship which was to last them the rest of their lives.

Then he released her hand. "It's a risk, you know," he said gravely.

She nodded. "I don't mind."

"You know I'll come back for you."

The beautiful face took on an added beauty with her dazzling smile. "Perhaps I'll get out myself."

"My dear," he said quietly, "this is a big thing—a much bigger thing than you or I know. We are standing, probably, in the midst of one of the greatest organisations China has ever known."

"*I know.*"

"What do you know?" he flashed at her.

"More than I can tell you. You are a great journalist. I am only a typist, but my honour and my work are as dear to me as yours are to you."

His eyes dilated. In the whole course of his experience amongst women he had never met a woman like this girl. "There is one thing quite certain," he said. "They don't intend to harm you, so there is no reason on earth why you shouldn't eat and drink what you choose. The mere fact that they brought you all this stuff," he nodded at the dishes and plates, "and wine of that quality, proves to me that they have got instructions to look after you well."

"That's *his* doing," the girl said simply. "He was always most kind. He always had tea and cakes ready for me when I got to his room. He was always wanting to give me things if I'd have let him. He would have sent me home every night of my life in a cab. What I can't understand, is, why he's not been here to see me. I wonder where he is."

"That's what I'm going to find out," said Dixon dryly. Then he looked round the room. "I suppose you can't give me any indications as to my best way out."

The girl shook her head. "I've never been outside this room and that room in there, where I sleep, until to-night. I've sometimes listened to them in there talking, but the doors have always been locked till now."

"Well, there's only one thing to do. I must chance it. But, first, we must shut the coffin up."

As he spoke he stepped back into the inner room, the girl following him. Together they lifted the lid down and shut it. At the sound of the gilt hands clasping together, Mortimer Dixon recalled his sensation when he had last heard that little click. Then a sudden horror of his own carelessness seized him. "If they come and look into that hole, as they very well may do, they'll see the coffin's empty."

"What shall we do?"

He cast a quick glance round the room in which they were standing. "I know. Get the coffin open again." He darted across the room, took the great image that sat on the golden bracket over the lamp off its pedestal, and laid it in the coffin. Then he laid the gold handkerchief over its face.

"They'll find you a good bit colder than I was," he said, as

they shut the lid of the coffin again—for months to come he could not repress a shudder when he heard even a door click—then they carefully set back on its shining surface the little gilt saucers containing the incense still alight, and crept back quietly into the other room.

On the threshold Mortimer Dixon stood still for an instant and looked back. The empty stools, the gorgeous draperies, the great Buddha, his jewelled eyes gleaming through the fragrant smoke which ascended, wreathing itself fantastically around his golden head, gripped him to the very soul. The dreamer and artist in him could have stood for hours gazing on that strange sight, but the other part of him awoke with a vengeance, and, as he shut the door with a firm hand, he seemed to close an invisible door shutting out the mystic side of himself. As he stood there, planning and determining what next steps to take, he was his own practical, self-reliant self again.

“If anyone met me like this,” he said to the girl, “I’m done.” His eyes darted hither and thither as though they would pierce the very walls. “Who works that second typewriter?” he demanded.

“I don’t know his name. He’s Chinese.”

“I suppose he doesn’t do as so many English clerks do—leave a coat here to put on while he’s at work?”

The girl caught his meaning at once and darted to a cupboard by the wall.

“He always wears this,” she cried. She unhooked and held out a blue cotton kimono such as the common Chinese labourers wear.

He snatched it from her, beside himself with joy. “It’s the very thing, if I can get into it.” He stopped short. “What about my hair.” He passed his hand over his close-cropped head.

Before the words were well out of his mouth, the girl had jumped to her decision as quickly as though she had been Mortimer Dixon himself.

Her hands tore at her hair, scattering the hairpins far and wide. Dixon could hardly repress a cry of admiration so beautiful was the sight of that gorgeous crown of a woman’s glory tumbling in raven masses to the ground.

“What on earth are you doing?”

But the girl, with her mouth full of hairpins, was busy plaiting her hair.

"No, no, no!" he cried, divining her intention. "It's a crime and a shame. I won't have it."

For answer the girl seized the scissors lying on the table and deliberately began sawing off her hair. "There's your pigtail," she cried triumphantly, under her breath. She held out the hair to him at arm's-length. He put out his hand and took the wonderful thing. Its silky shining seemed to cling to his hand.

"I'm engaged to the best and dearest woman in the world," he said, white to the lips with emotion; "if it were not for her I should have been in the gutter many a time. I love her with all that's best in me, for hers is the hand that, when I should have fallen, has held me up; but on my word, you strange girl with your beautiful face and your splendid, brave heart, if it were not for her I should fall at your feet."

"And I'm engaged to a man whom my mother calls a beast and a rotter," the girl answered him. "His belief in me keeps him from being bad. He'd have fallen into the gutter and stayed there if I hadn't dragged him out. I love him with all that's best in me, but I tell you, on my word, you strange, dominant man, with your nerves of iron and your sparkling eyes, if it were not for him being at my feet, I should be at yours."

"Look here," he said roughly, "this is fools' talk! Why did you cut off your hair like this? What's the good of it now you've done it? How am I going to stick the thing on?"

"I know!" The girl darted into the room which she had pointed out to Dixon as her bedroom. She was away for two or three minutes. During that time he stood looking round and round the room. Then she came back again with a little black woollen golf cap in her hand, and a safety pin.

"Put this on," she commanded him, "and I'll pin this hair on to it at the back."

He did as he was told without a word.

"Now get into the kimono." She held it out for him.

In silence he complied.

"It's your eyes that spoil you," she declared, critically looking him up and down. "Take off your boots, quick."

He fell rather than sat down on the chair by the door, and tore off his boots. Meantime the girl, snatching the cork out of the wine bottle, held it in the gas.

“ Now, hold up your face.”

He held it up.

With an artist's hand, which recalled her mother's saying that the girl's father had followed that profession, she touched his eyebrows, and the sides of his eyes. “ Now look at yourself.” She caught him by the shoulder and he turned his face and looked at himself in the glass. On his clean-shaven countenance the dexterous touch of burnt cork had effected a transformation. Dixon's sparkling glance looked back at him from the mirror with the cunning obliqueness of a Mongolian. The girl had caught the look to life.

His skin would of course have betrayed him in the daylight, but, in the dark, with his face in the shadow and his pigtail dangling behind him, if luck favoured him, he might pass at a pinch.

“ Hide your hands in your sleeves, round your shoulders, bend your head and shuffle,” the girl opened the door as she spoke and “ Good-bye. Good luck to you.”

Tears, strange evidences of a strong man's emotion, wrung from him against his will, smarted to Dixon's eyes.

“ I'll come back for you,” he said brokenly. He seized her hand and kissed it. “ God bless you, and good-night.”

He left her there, standing, with her noble, shorn head thrown back and her beautiful face shining under the flaring gas, on fire with excitement and hope. It came to Mortimer Dixon, joyfully slipping down the stairs, that he might, without any disloyalty to the dear little soul in Brixton, treasure away that wonderful look and remember it for the rest of his life.

Truly the gods were with him that night ! Without let or hindrance he walked down the stairs, and, with the stealthy hand of a thief, let himself out of the front door into the star-strewn night.

It was a glorious night ! The heavens were spangled with stars. The moon was at the full. There was not a cloud to be seen. The night wind, cool and refreshing, blew up from the east. He opened his mouth and drank it in great draughts as if it were wine. It seemed to him, after that exotic atmosphere impregnated with pungent scents, that he had never realised what the joy of sweet, pure, clean air was, before.

He stood on the top step with the door in his hand. He could not make up his mind to shut it. The thought of the

girl he was leaving behind him went through and through him like a knife.

Suppose he *was* "up" against a great thing! Suppose he *did* bring it off! Suppose that he, alone, of all the journalists in Fleet Street, unearthed this hidden treasure of mystery and laid it bare to the light of day, and this girl, whom he had left behind to face it out on her own, by some horrible mischance in his reckoning, came to some harm! What could all the glorification do for him then?

In his imagination, with his blood running at fever heat, he saw what this thing might mean to him. Already the first sentences of his great story were forming themselves in his head. Gods! what a story it would be. Every element of romantic detail in which the public delighted. the laundry, the coffin, the ivory stools, the gilt Buddha: his own incarceration in that glory of scarlet and gold; his journey underground through vast London, his supper of chicken and choice Burgundy given to him through the lid; the horrible moment when the gilt hands refused to work! The terror and excitement when the girl cut off her hair!

But suppose that, when it came to the telling, the girl was dead!

Yet, it was the right thing to do, or rather it was the wise thing. Undoubtedly, no harm would come to her. They would keep her safe for their own sakes. In a few hours, reinforced by the law and picked men from Scotland Yard, he could return and rescue her. Why then should he hesitate? Yet hesitate he did. On the one hand, ambition, his strongest passion, tore at him savagely, commanding him to take the thing that was given him in his strong young hands, and, heedless of everything and everyone, go on his way.

"That is the way all great men have arrived at their greatness," a voice said to him. "Do you suppose Napoleon hesitated to wade through seas of blood to reach his throne? Do you suppose that great generals won their battles shilly-shallying over the possible fact of a sentry being dead? Do you suppose that kings have seized their kingdoms, wrenched them away from other kings, hesitating on doorsteps for fear some petty life may be lost?"

Dixon's hand closed like a vice on the door. Almost the door was shut. Yet, if the girl came to any harm, of what

use would victories and kingdoms be to him who had left her to fight alone.

Again that inner voice came to him, tempting him. By some devilish instinct it seemed to know his weakest spot. In some infernal way it put before him the things that he most desired. It ran through him, searching him out, into the innermost hiding-places of his soul.

It showed him, himself, a great man, ruling the great destinies of a great paper, and, indirectly, through that influence, ruling and moulding the destinies of the world. "This is the great moment of your destiny. This is the turning-point of your life," the voice whispered to him. "Shut that door and seize it before it is too late."

Still he stood on the doorstep and held the door open in his hand.

"If you go back," the voice whispered to him, "it's a thousand to one you'll never come out alive. The girl's safe enough; you've said it yourself; didn't she say it too? To-morrow, you can fetch her out. It is a million to one that you could get out of the house without anyone seeing you, and yet you stand on the doorstep and hesitate if you should go. It's these moments which show a man's capacity for greatness. They come once in a lifetime. Take your chance when it is offered you. It may never be offered you again. You've done the incredible thing. You've tracked this thing to its very fountain-head.

"This disappearance of a girl, snatched away in the very heart of civilised London, has baffled the cleverest detectives in London. You have found her by the strength of your own hand, by the work of your own brain. It will mean money. It will mean all the things you want for the girl you love. A beautiful home, dresses and jewels for her. Think of the furniture you couldn't afford to buy yesterday. With a stroke of a pen it will be yours. Think of the man you have worshipped. Think what *he* will say to you. Think of the look in his deep-set eyes when he smiles at you. Think of the grasp of his hand and the tone in his voice when he says 'Well done.' Fool! take your moment when it's offered you. What is the life of a little typist compared to all the wealth, ambition and fame this will mean to you?"

Mortimer Dixon put up his hand to his head. It was throbbing as if it would burst. His hand fell on the waves of her soft hair.

"She cut off her hair to save me," he said to himself, and, though he did not know it, he spoke aloud.

"Be wise," urged the voice tempting him. "The moments are flying. Shut the door. Seize your chance. It will never return!"

He stamped his foot with fury. "I *won't* be wise," he cried, throwing back his head. "I'll be damned if I shut that door."

He opened the door, and closed it. So fiercely intent was he on that struggle between his lower and higher self that he almost shut it with a bang.

Up the stairs he went, three steps at a time. His instinct for locality led him straight to the door of the room. Without even heeding the necessity for precaution, which bade him stop and listen, he threw it open and went in.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN the centre of the room stood the girl, her head thrown back, her face as white as death. In her hand she held the scissors, the great shears with which, ten minutes before, she had cut off her hair.

Beside her, with his back to Dixon, stood a tall Chinaman with his arms around the girl. "If you touch me I'll kill you," she was saying, and Dixon noticed with a thrill of triumph that, terrible as her danger was, there was no sign of fear, but only fury, in her splendid eyes.

"Plitty Ingliss laly, kissee Chinaman!" The shrill voice vibrating with passion made Dixon's blood run cold. "Nobolly in biggee housee, nobolly know Plitty Ingliss laly kissee chin-chin-Chinaman. Nobolly know." He thrust his face down into hers and she struck at him with the scissors with all her force.

At that very instant, her eyes shifting, she saw Dixon on the threshold, and she missed her blow.

The scissors flew pattering to the floor, and the Chinaman crushed her to him as Dixon, with the fury of a panther, bounded on his back, and felled him. The attack was so unexpected and, coming from the back, had the man at such a disadvantage that, though he was some four inches taller than Dixon, and a much heavier-built man, he was helpless before the onslaught.

"Sit on his legs and hold him down," Dixon called to the girl. In an instant she had thrown her full weight across the man's legs and had pinned him down.

"I'll 'plitty Ingliss laly you,' you brute!" Dixon growled between his teeth. He took hold of his pigtail and wound it round his neck, half choking the life out of him. "You beast, you're not fit to swing for, or, by God, I'd tear your heart out." He seized the end of the pigtail in his mouth, and pulled at it with his teeth, the while he took the man's head in his hands and bumped it furiously up and down on the floor.

Perhaps he bumped harder than he meant to, or perhaps the pigtail was coiled a little too tight. Be that as it may, in less time than it takes in the telling, the Chinaman lay unconscious on the floor.

"Have you killed him?" said the girl, and again Dixon noted with triumph there was not a tremor of fear in her clear young voice.

"I don't know, and I don't care," he answered her. "I hope to God I have." He spat the pigtail out of his mouth in a fury of physical disgust. If you had asked him at that moment the thing he most desired on earth, he would have asked for a toothbrush and some disinfectant soap. "Rip off your skirt," he said to her. "You've got to put on these." He began to tear off the Chinaman's clothes. There was a lacquered screen in the room. The girl jumped to her feet, ran behind it and began to tear off her clothes. One by one as Dixon stripped him, he hurled the garments across the room. Then he caught at the fringe of the tablecloth and shoved it over the man. "You heathen cur," he apostrophised the unconscious Chinaman. "You're proud of your pigtail, are you!" He snatched the scissors from the ground and, as the girl had done ten minutes before, in his turn he sawed the pigtail off the Chinaman's head.

As he did so, there emerged from behind the screen a wonderful little figure in a gorgeous rose-coloured coat and trousers embroidered in gold and green.

Mortimer Dixon, lover of beauty, with the pigtail in the one hand and the scissors in the other, sat back on his heels and gaped. "Gollypots!" he cried, his irrepressible self well to the fore again, "you look perfectly ripping. You take my tip and stick to that style of dress."

"What about my hair?"

For answer he threw her the pigtail and the little rose silk cap.

"Stick that on your head," he commanded her. "And in the meantime, just out of pure love for this poor darling in case he might catch cold, I'll wrap him up. Got a bit of string anywhere?"

The girl rushed behind the screen and in another moment came back with her clothes. "Take the tape out of these."

"Not strong enough."

"Then tear the petticoats up."

All the time she was talking she was fixing the pigtail on her head. In another second she was on her knees, and they were tearing the dainty white garments into strips.

Then she held one end, and Dixon, using the tablecloth as a foundation, rolled the Chinaman over and over, until he had him completely trussed up.

"I've half-a-mind to put him into the coffin," he told the girl, grinning with delight at the thought.

But she shook her head. "Gag him and leave him. The others may soon be back."

He took the remaining pieces of her clothes and rolled them into a ball. "I'll open the beast's mouth and you shove it in." No sooner said than done.

Then they got up.

"Hold on to me," said Dixon. "Bring the scissors with you, and if anyone attacks you, make for his eyes."

The girl snatched up the scissors and the two ran out of the room.

The staircase, pitch dark ten minutes before when Dixon had made his way down, was now flooded with light. He had failed to notice on his first journey anything but the fact that he was feeling his way to freedom and escape. He had ignored everything but how to reach the front door. This time, however, his every sense was on the qui vive, he noticed how his feet, still shoeless, sank into the carpet on the stairs. "Velvet pile," he said to himself, nodding his head. He noticed how the banister beneath his hand was not smooth in the ordinary way, but covered with excrescences of curves and hollows and raised bumps. "Carved wood," said Dixon. He noticed, where the moonlight fell on the walls, that the paper stood out in thick ribs, and he told himself that the staircase was panelled in silk. In the hall, spacious, far-reaching and lofty, he discerned the carved

chairs, the inlaid frames, the gong on its massive silver mount with the handle of the beater in delicately wrought gold.

"Gollypots!" he said to himself, "where the dickens are we? Judging by the way the place is furnished, I should think this little dosshouse is somewhere in Park Lane."

Down the first flight of stairs, across the landing, and down the second flight into the hall.

They had just reached the front-door mat, and his hand was actually on the latch, when the girl pounced upon him from the back.

"Somebody coming up the steps," she whispered. They turned back noiselessly in their stockinged feet into the remotest recess of the hall. "What shall we do?" she breathed.

"Get behind that screen and crouch down. If they spot me, I'll tackle them. If I get the worst of it, don't you wait! Just get out of the front door as quick as you can. In any case, keep tight hold of those scissors, and remember what I told you about going for their eyes."

"You've got on a servant's clothes," she whispered back rapidly; "if they speak to you, fall down on your knees and bend your head forward. That's what the servants always do upstairs if any of them come in. Keep your head down well, and perhaps they won't see your face." She crept down behind the screen. The door swung open noiselessly, and three men came in. Two of them were short, and one of them was tall. The bright moon, falling sharply on the face of the tall man, showed Dixon, glancing up under his eyelashes, the scar on his right cheekbone as clearly as if it had been day.

It was the man who had sat before him on the bus.

Dixon came forward and fell on his knees, with his hands hidden in the sleeves of his kimono, and his face prostrated to the ground. His pigtail, made of the girl's hair, fell straight down his blue cotton back, lithe and bright as a snake.

The illusion was perfect, even if the light had been far brighter than it was.

The three men passed him in silence, and were half-way up the stairs when the tall one turned and called out something sharply in Chinese.

No need for Dixon to understand that language to realise

from the tone of the voice that the remark was addressed to him, whatever it was. Detection seemed inevitable, but, at that very instant across his brain came flashing the memory of an amateur performance of the Gilbert and Sullivan opera, *The Mikado*, in which he had taken part as a youth. Without an instant's hesitation he got to his feet, shuffled forward with his head bent down, and fell down again on the mat at the foot of the stairs, bowing his head to the ground three times rapidly in succession, as if too overwhelmed by the honour of being addressed at all by one so highly his superior, even to speak.

The ruse succeeded beyond his hopes. The man, apparently satisfied that his order had been understood, passed on after his companions, who were already out of sight.

For an instant Dixon remained in his posture of humility at the foot of the stairs. As soon as the shadow of the ascending Chinaman was swallowed up in the darkness of the turning of the staircase he jumped to his feet and, running to the screen, got hold of the girl.

Before you could say "Jack Robinson" they were across the hall, had opened the door, and were standing out in the street.

"They'll be after us in a second," he whispered to her hoarsely. "Don't run, you little fool," he added, catching her by the arm sharply; "for all we know this may be a Chinese quarter. We don't look like Europeans. Waddle, you idiot, waddle for all you're worth."

They waddled.

And, as they waddled, his keen eyes, searching the luminous darkness, took his bearings as well as he could.

What quarter of the town they were in, north, south, east or west, he knew no more than a child. The street was broad, but his keen intelligence noted at once that, though they passed lampposts, the first two were not alight. He also noted that the pavement abutted not on to houses, but on to a high wall—evidently the walls of the garden belonging to the house.

"Where the devil are we?" said he.

But the girl heard him. "I haven't the slightest idea," said she.

Something in her voice struck him with dismay. "What's the matter with you?" he said roughly; "you don't feel faint, do you?"

"Of course I don't."

"Why don't you waddle faster?"

"I'm waddling as fast as I can."

For a few seconds they waddled on in silence, then the girl stopped short and clutched at his arm. "You must go on without me." This time there was no mistaking the faintness of her voice.

"Why?"

"I'm afraid I can't waddle any longer. I've cut my foot."

"Cut your foot!" he looked down into the beautiful face which, in the moonlight, shone up at him deathly white. "Good God! you don't mean to say you've hurt yourself badly?" For answer she just closed her eyes and gave a little sigh. If he had not caught her, she would have fallen. The poor child had fainted away.

He lifted her across the pavement and set her down, propping her back up against the wall. Then, kneeling beside her, he stripped off her stocking to see the extent of the injury to her foot. He could hardly repress a cry as he saw what she had done to herself. She must have trod on a flint, for the flesh was cut, laying a gash bare almost to the bone.

"She is a plucky one!" said Dixon to himself with appreciation. "Every step she took must have been like treading on a knife."

Instinctively, his hand went to his pocket for his handkerchief. The cotton coat he was wearing had neither handkerchief nor pocket. For the first time it crossed his mind what a fool he had been to leave his own coat, and the contents of his pockets, behind in the house.

His handkerchief marked with his initials, his cigarette-case with his name in full and an inscription and, worst of all, a card-case with his cards, stating, not only his club, but his private address. Here was a complication with a vengeance! But that must wait for the future to be dealt with. Here, under his very hand, was a complication whose pre-eminent demand could not be denied.

In an instant he had whipped off his cotton coat and was tearing it into strips with his strong young teeth and hands. He bound the wounded foot up with the tenderness and dexterity of a woman. He always piqued himself, and not without justification, on the neatness of his hands. Not for

the first time in his career, they stood him in good stead. The foot was bandaged up, but the girl showed no sign of returning consciousness. He was in despair. He had neither water nor the means of procuring it. He had neither spirits nor scent on him to help restore her to life. There was nothing to do but to wait.

He waited.

While he waited, kneeling in the shadow of the wall, with the girl's beautiful head lying on his shoulder, his eyes caught sight of the track of blood which her foot had made along the street.

The moon shone clear and full. The street was like a pathway of beaten gold. On that shining surface, the dark crimson splashes seemed to him like a pathway of blood leading back to that sinister place. Even as he looked, he caught sight of three men in the distance. They were running, and the shadows of their quaint coats and flying pigtailed patterned themselves in fantastic outlines on the white stone wall.

So they had discovered that the girl was gone.

Three to one, and that one unarmed! He picked the girl up in his arms and ran furiously into the night.

Dixon was a young man, and a strong man. Though he was not a believer in everlasting holidays, and though he did not waste his time and substance as did the rest of his kind in everlasting games, still he was no slouch when it came to keeping himself in trim. Every morning of his life, before he set out to the Park for his swim in the Serpentine, he exercised himself in his little room with dumb-bells and clubs. Every week of his life he weighed in at the gymnasium, where he went without fail twice a week. As a consequence, he was in the very pink of condition. But he had been under a severe strain himself, and the girl, slight as she was, lay a dead weight in his arms.

Not for one instant did he conceive there was any possibility of escape. But he ran, as he did everything else that he put his hand to, with all his might. He knew well enough that they would not only outdistance him, but it was a million to one that they would kill him and seize the girl. The thought of the huge Chinaman's face as he bent over her and she struggled against him came back to Dixon, lending him such strength of purpose that he ran as if he had wings to his feet.

"Rather will I kill her with my own hand," he told himself, "than that they should get her back."

Meantime, over his shoulder he saw that the three men were steadily gaining on him. The tall one was leading. As he emerged from the shadow into the moonlight, he appeared to Dixon like a figure in a nightmare, so huge was he and, in his quaint costume, so grotesque. Along the road they came running like the wind. The two men after a very few yards dropped out, and the race narrowed itself down to the Chinaman and Dixon. Every second the Chinaman's advantage grew more apparent as they ran.

Gallant soul though Dixon was, the handicap was too much for him, weak as he was from his confinement in the coffin and from want of food, and unduly burdened as he was, with the weight of the girl: also he did not know where he was going, and the Chinaman did. That was the worst handicap of all. The stone wall seemed to extend for miles. What the other side of the street was like he could not see, and he had not the time to stop to find out. As he ran on, he gathered that it was an open space swallowed up in the darkness, but the moon fell aslant, and it was impossible for him to make sure. Twice as he ran he came across a turning, but it was so narrow, and so dark, he feared to take advantage of it lest it should prove a cul-de-sac. As long as his strength held out he determined to keep to the open. That was his only chance.

Meantime the Chinaman was within a few feet of him. He had almost come to the decision that he would put the girl down, and wait for his adversary, and fight for it, when just at that moment the girl opened her eyes.

"What on earth are you doing?" she gasped faintly.

"They're after us," panted Dixon. "You've cut your foot and I'm carrying you."

"Put me down," she said to him. "I can run."

In the midst of his physical and mental turmoil, he smiled.

"Try and look over my shoulder and tell me how close he is," he panted.

The girl shifted a little in his arms and looked over his shoulder. "He's quite, quite close."

He clasped her to him fiercely. He was beat, and he knew it, but he would not give in till he dropped. "If I only knew where we were," he muttered.

The girl's ears were as sharp as his, and she heard him.

She shifted her gaze again, and began to look around. "Why, I know this street," she said, in surprise. "Many a time I've passed it going to my work."

"Do you mean it's near Whitechapel?" he panted.

"Of course it's Whitechapel. We're quite close to the Commercial Road."

He could have shouted for sheer joy. The words seemed to put new life into him. His pace increased like a racer who suddenly sights his goal.

"Ten yards more you turn to your left, and in another minute you'll be in the Commercial Road," whispered the girl.

He did not answer her; he had not the strength left to speak. He simply increased his pace, and like a madman tore down the street.

The pitter patter of the feet following him seemed suddenly to die away.

"Look over my shoulder, quick, and tell me if he's following."

The girl lifted herself up in his arms and peered into the luminously intermittent darkness.

"I can't see him. He's stopped."

Stopped. The word revived him like a draught of wine. He threw up his head, set his teeth and struggled on valiantly. At the end of ten yards, as the girl had predicted, was the turning.

"He's coming on again."

To Dixon's straining ears the sound came of pattering footsteps close on his heels. Round the corner tore Dixon. Round the corner tore the Chinaman after him. Each was almost within a hand's-breadth of the other. "Wind this infernal pigtail round my neck so he sha'n't catch me by it."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when he felt the thing coiling round his neck. "Got the scissors."

"Yes,"

"Hold them in your hand, and jab them at him if he tries to get hold of me."

He felt the cold of the steel against his neck. He knew that he was at the last gasp of his strength.

The little street they were running down was black as night. Suddenly a sharp turning brought them into full view of a flaming line of gas lights. To Dixon those common-

place acetylene lamps were like the crystal globes illuminating an earthly paradise.

"Commercial Road," said the girl in his ear.

He could hardly believe his ears.

Commercial Road! But the little court up the blind alley, where he had first found the entrance to the cellar, was quite a quarter of an hour from there! Then he had underestimated rather than overestimated the distance he had been carried in the coffin! That underground journey of his must have traversed a vast cellarage extending nearly two miles! With the dead weight of the girl in his arms, his breath coming in short, hard gasps, and his heart banging as though it would leap out of his breast, even then Dixon was sensible of a wild elation despite the agony he was undergoing. He had judged his distance aright.

On and on he went, blind and deaf to everything except the fact that just within his sight lay the Commercial Road! Yet not so blind was he but that, without turning his head, he could see the mysterious shadow looming up behind him; nor yet so deaf that he could not hear the pitter patter of the footfalls of his enemy closing in on him from the back. He was almost spent, and he knew it. He felt as a drowning man feels when his strength gives out almost as his feet touch the safety of the shore. Not if his life depended on it could he go another step. He reeled, he gasped, he staggered, he stumbled; almost, he fell.

He righted himself like a gallant ship on the point of foundering; then he stumbled again.

A gigantic hand was thrust out of the darkness and seized his pigtail, which had uncoiled itself from around his neck. There was a crick, a crack and a snap, and the thing came off in his hand! The second's delay, occasioned probably by the Chinaman's surprise, gave the girl time to slip to the ground. She got hold of Dixon's hand, and the two ran down the street together—she, in her excitement, forgetful of her suffering; he, relieved of her weight, feeling renewed strength for just one more sprint.

On and on they ran, lurching, reeling, gasping for breath. Dixon, looking backwards, saw his enemy once again hot-foot on them, his shadow more grotesque than ever, for he was waving the pigtail in his hand.

On and on. On and on. Now submerged in darkness, now illumined in a patch of light. Now on the pavement,

now on the road. The girl clutching at Dixon, Dixon clutching at the girl, and the girl clutching at the scissors in her hand.

Dixon's brain whirled round. His eyes swam. His heart seemed pounding his very life-blood away in his ears. Although he did not know it, the blood was pouring from his nose. A lurch, a scramble, a final effort, and the pair, hand in hand, were round the corner and in the Commercial Road.

But Commercial Road at two o'clock in the morning is very different from the Commercial Road at two o'clock in the day. The last time Dixon had stood there, he had seen it as a vast anthill, swarming with fellow-creatures gathered together from every quarter of the world. He had seen it with its booths, and its carts, and its motors, and its police, full of the strength and life of the polyglot city, the air raucous with the hoarse cries of the vendors screaming out their wares. In the garish day it had been a great vein drawing its life-blood from the heart of Mother London. Now, in the silence of the moonlight, it was a deserted city, stretching its silent way into the golden shadows of moonlight and romance.

There it lay deserted. Not a light to be seen in any of the windows, not a passer-by to be appealed to ; no friendly policeman, guardian of the helpless, within sight.

Not a cart ; not a tram ; not a van ; not a barrow ! Only a spent man and woman, and an enemy following them, full of life and strength. Only these three in all that great thoroughfare of great London. These three . . .

And a taxicab.

Chug, a chug ; chug, chug ! it came towards them looming out of the darkness into the light.

Slowly, stealthily it came onward, and at the sight of it Dixon's heart stopped its mad beating, and he shook so that he could not speak. He tried to call. He could not. He tried to wave his arm. He could not even lift his hand. He tried to whistle. He could not even press his trembling lips together. He seized hold of the girl by the shoulder with a grip of iron and said, "Scream, girl ! scream for all you're worth !"

The girl lifted her voice and screamed—screamed fit to wake the dead.

At the sound of that screaming, it seemed to Dixon that the motor car stopped. He strained his ears, and there was

no sound of chug-chugging to greet them ; only the panting of the man's deep breathing close at hand.

"Scream again," he commanded hoarsely.

And again the girl screamed.

That cry of anguish intolerable went out into the night, dividing the invisible waves of air like a flame. There was no mistaking that cry. It was the cry formed by æons of tradition which had come peeling down through the ages ; the cry that there is no withstanding as long as man is man and woman is woman ; the cry of a woman in distress.

And once again the cry had its effect, and the man answered its call. The throb of the motor began to purr like an angry cat ; the taxicab rushed forward, eating up the distance between it and them like a Juggernaut devouring stones instead of men.

In another instant it drew up beside them. Dixon recognised the God-given inspiration that had made him keep the taxicab waiting, as the moonlight fell on the man's surprised face, bending forward !

It was the driver of Number Thirteen.

All this, which takes so long to tell, took no time at all to occur.

A flash, a look, a spark, a scream, and the thing was done.

That flight, which had seemed to Mortimer Dixon to last centuries, had lasted considerably less than a quarter of an hour. That scream which, to him, had seemed to go across the ages, had been almost simultaneous with the drawing near, and the stopping, of the taxicab.

So also with the Chinaman. Recovering from his dismay, he dashed forward with renewed vigour, and closed in on his victims.

"Now then, I say, what's up ?" said the chauffeur.

"It's me," gasped Dixon to the amazed driver, who instantly recognised his voice. He banged the door open, and pushed the girl in, and had his foot on the step, in the act of getting in himself, when his enemy sprang upon him, dragging him backwards to the ground.

Like lightning the girl leant forward and with the sharp point of the scissors struck the Chinaman full in the face.

Again the unpremeditated effect was instantaneous in its result. The man with a smothered curse fell back and let go his prey. The girl extended her hands and helped Dixon

to scramble in. Without waiting for them to shut the door, the chauffeur, grasping the exigencies of the situation, set his engine going and the taxi drove off.

CHAPTER XIX

FOR fully five minutes there was complete silence in the cab, broken only by Dixon's deep, gasping breaths. As for the girl, she lay back in her corner, clutching her hands and biting her lips until the blood came so that she might not scream.

Where they were going, or what they were going to do, Dixon neither knew nor cared. The only thing that worried him was how to get his breath back. His heart bounded and banged and throbbed, and throbbed and bounded and banged, until he felt as if he should suffocate. The strain on him, body and nerves and brain, had been enormous. A lesser man than he, in less good training and less gifted by nature with a fine physique, would probably have been seriously ill.

He, however, was not one of those men who hold on till the great moment is passed, and then give in. He went on "holding on" for all he was worth and, gradually, little by little, the maddening feeling of breathlessness subsided, his hands ceased to shake, and his heart ceased to bang. It was characteristic of him that the first thing that came to his mind, with the immediate cessation of his own physical anguish, was to think of the girl and her foot.

"How is your foot?" he gasped. "Does it hurt much?"

"I don't know," the girl answered him hoarsely. "I haven't thought about it. I was too busy thinking of you."

Poor Dixon! In that moment of frantic mental emotion which always follows on the top of great physical strain, he would have given the world to have taken the girl in his arms and hugged her, even if he never set eyes on her again. He was dying to overflow to somebody, but catch him doing it! He knew his own weakness far too well for that! "All the same," he said to himself—and he grinned at the thought—"there's a lot to be said for Mormons! There are times when I'd like to be one myself!"

"Where are we going?" said the girl faintly.

Dixon—the irrepressible—in the midst of his thumping

and faintness and suffocation, began to laugh. "I've not the faintest idea." He roused himself with a tremendous effort—for really he was terribly limp—let down the window beside him and put out his head. "Angel from heaven!" he apostrophised the astonished chauffeur, "where are you taking us?"

The man turned round and his bright smile, so like Dixon's own, shone out in the moonlight. "I'm just going round and round, sir, until you tell me the address."

"Then we're still in Whitechapel?"

"You seem to have a kind of a fancy for the place, sir."

Dixon laughed aloud. "By Jove," he said, in his boyish way. "You're a trump! You won't be sorry for this night's work, I can tell you. You can bet your boots on that. Look here, go up to that little street where the trams all stop. Do you know where I mean?"

"Where you left the lady to-day, sir?"

"Good man! that's it. Full steam ahead."

Full steam ahead it was with a vengeance. The taxicab, as Dixon had noticed the night before, had not only an excellent driver, but also a surprisingly powerful engine. "We shall be there in five minutes," he said to the girl, as he dropped back on to his seat.

"Be where?"

"At your mother's house. Where else do you suppose!"

"My mother's." The very speaking of the words touched the hidden springs. With a little gasp, the girl hid her face in the corner and began to cry.

He did not try to stop her. He thought it was the very best thing she could do. He did not even try to comfort her. He just sat tight in his own corner, and let her sob her heart out.

Tears of repentance; tears of regret; tears of physical pain; tears of passionate excitement! At her age it is easy to cry. In the next five minutes the girl's tears had gauged every point of human emotion and distress. Dixon in his corner wished with all his heart that he was a woman that he might cry too. Being a man, he mentally reviewed the events of the past few hours, and tried to gauge what the result to himself would be.

He had located the Chinaman in plebeian disguise. He had located the organisation of which he probably was the head. In a few hours, by sheer good luck, and the help of

his own acute intelligence, he had done more than Scotland Yard had done in almost as many days. So far so good. But what was the net result? He could not produce the Chinaman. He did not even know where he was. He had not the faintest idea what that secret house, so magnificently furnished, in Whitechapel might mean, but, at anyrate, whatever he had or had not accomplished, at least he had found the girl! Nobody could take that away from him. Without any help or advice, he had plumbed the heart of London, and out of its depths, by the exercise of his own courage and cunning, he had brought back to the surface, unharmed, the missing girl.

"Whatever else I get out of it," he said to himself, "at least I've got this. Out of the millions of prayers and tears that go up to high heaven, apparently unanswered, I, with God's help, have set one human heart at rest."

The taxi whizzed round the corner and drew up silently in front of the little house.

Before it had stopped he had opened the door, and was up the steps. A light was burning in the hall and at the ground-floor window. He rapped first at the window and then knocked softly at the front door.

Instantly it was flung wide open and the widow appeared. At the sight of Dixon she fell back in dismay.

"What's up?" he said, in amazement.

"It's *you*!"

He followed her pointing finger, and began to laugh. It had clean gone out of his head how he was dressed. "You bet it's me," he said gaily. "Come on, I've got her."

"You've got my girl?"

"You bet I've got her. Come on!"

Instead of "coming on," to his dismay the poor woman flung herself at his feet and, clasping his hands, began kissing them with the frenzied ardour of a devotee embracing his saint.

Dixon had been longing for kisses! Now he had got them. Unhappily, however, as is the way of life, it was not exactly that kind of kissing he required.

"Come, come, Mrs Latham," he said kindly. "You keep those kisses for her. She's waiting!"

Before the word was out of his mouth the widow was on her feet. "Where is she? Oh, where is my girl? Take me to her. Quick! Quick!"

"I'm only waiting for you. Run upstairs and put some clothes together. Come on! I'll help you."

Dixon was notoriously quick on his feet, but this time it was the widow who got first to the top.

Standing in that spotless little bedroom watching the distracted mother, he did not have to ask himself twice from whom the girl had inherited those qualities which had aroused such a passion of admiration in him that night.

"What kind of clothes will she want?"

"Everything. She's got nothing."

"Nothing!" The widow turned and faced him. "Do you mean my girl is ill?"

"You bet she's not ill."

"Not hurt? Not injured in any way?"

"Not a scrap, except a cut on the foot."

"My God, it's too good to be true!" She turned back to her task, deftly and quietly opening and shutting the cupboards and drawers. "I'm ready."

He snatched the bundle of things she had gathered together out of her arms. "Bring your own slippers, and a dressing-gown as well."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Oh, don't worry me," he said roughly. "Don't talk so much. Look slippy. All the time you stand here jabbering, that taxi's running up."

That was an argument which appealed to a woman accustomed to economy. She got the dressing-gown and, snatching a pair of slippers from under the bed, joined him at the door. "I'm ready." Then she stopped short. "Mr Dixon," she said, and her voice changed in the same extraordinary way as Dixon had noticed her daughter's changed, when she was greatly moved—"Mr Dixon," she said slowly, "you say my girl is neither hurt nor ill. I thank God for His mercy that she's alive and well, but there's one thing you *must* answer me: Is my daughter that I'm going to now the same daughter that went away from me last week?"

"She is."

The tears began to run down the thin, worn cheeks. "Then I've nothing left to ask God for," she said simply. She turned away and went down the stairs.

"Wait a jiffy! You've forgotten something," he cried

to her. "Your toothbrushes." Laughing, he darted back into the room, and seized them and a sponge hanging against the wall in a net.

"What do we want with toothbrushes? Aren't we coming back?"

"You bet your boots you're not. Oh, for heaven's sake, do stop talking and buck up." He closed the door behind her, and slipping his arm round her, helped her down the steps to the cab as tenderly as if he were her son.

Then his great moment arrived. He opened the door and said quite quietly: "Here's your girl."

"Mother!"

"Daughter!"

The two women sprang at each other with a cry that went to Dixon's very soul. He bundled the clothes in after them and banged the door on them.

"There's too much hugging and kissing going on in there for a single man," he said, grinning at the taxicab-driver. "Hitch up a bit, there's a good chap, and make room for me."

"Better pull the rug well round you, sir, if we're going where we shall be seen. Your costume may be a little bit of all right for a fancy-dress ball, but it's a bit orf for the streets!"

"Right-o." Dixon hopped on and huddled himself into the rug. "Get a move on her."

"Where to, sir?"

"Duke Street, Adelphi."

The chauffeur turned his cab, and they went through the streets like the wind.

That wonderful rushing through desolate London at the mysterious hour when the glory of night is slowly turning to the splendour of the day, restored the young journalist to himself more effectually than food or wine. Not one word did he speak until they got to Northumberland Avenue. Then he turned to the chauffeur and said: "You've done me a turn to-night that I'll never forget as long as I live. I don't know what I'll get out of it, but, in any case, it'll be worth a fiver to you. Come up to-morrow to the address where you'll drive me when we've dropped these ladies, and it'll be ready for you."

"Thank you, sir."

The two men settled the whole thing, without the slightest

feeling of distrust on the one side or patronage on the other, in half-a-dozen words.

The taxi drew up at the house where Mortimer Dixon lived, and he hopped down. "Here's my key," he said to Mrs Latham. "You know my rooms. You go straight up there and make yourselves at home. There's gas and a kettle, and a bottle of brandy unopened in the right-hand dresser drawer, and a box of biscuits somewhere about. Give her a good stiff dose of brandy, and mind you take one yourself."

"But where are *you* going, sir?" the bewildered woman said to him.

"I'm going to lie in the lap of luxury. Don't you worry about me. I'm staying at a friend's." He turned as he spoke, and half getting back into the cab, he hoisted the girl out. "I'd carry you up the stairs if I could, but I'm afraid I can't. You'll have to hobble up. Good-night."

"Good-night."

The girl's splendid eyes looked at him with a passion of gratitude in their liquid depths.

"And lie low," he added, catching the widow by the arm and speaking in her ear. "I'll telephone to you to-morrow what to do; but until you hear from me, don't stir, and whoever comes don't you open the door." He bundled the two women through the front door, shut it and returned to the cab. "Trundle me along, my boy, up to Dashley Gardens." So exhausted was he that, when the short journey came to an end, the chauffeur had to get down and shake him before he could rouse himself, so fast asleep he was.

"Wish I could ask you to come up and have a whisky and soda," Dixon mumbled—he was so utterly done up he could hardly speak—"but I can't. There's a coffee stall at Hyde Park Corner where the coffee's fit to drink. Be here to-morrow at twelve."

"Very good, sir."

"Good-night." Mortimer Dixon roused himself with a final effort and held out his hand, and his sunny smile shone out at the other tired man. "And thank you with all my heart."

"Thank you, sir."

The two men clasped hands and parted.

Dixon stumbled up the stairs—the flights seemed to him

like stairs in a nightmare—as though they would never end. Then he inserted Carew's latchkey softly into the keyhole, and noiselessly let himself in. No "impressions" that time! No psychic warnings; no mysterious forebodings; nothing but a mad desire for food and sleep. He crept down the corridor, through the green baize door into the larder. It was bare, but for a loaf of bread and a jug of milk. He swallowed the milk and tore a huge hunk off the bread. Still gnawing it, he lurched back into Carew's bedroom and there Mortimer Dixon the spotless, the lover of soap and water, the lunatic who had his bed linen changed almost as often as his shirts, Mortimer Dixon, in a filthy Chinaman's suit, with black hands, and his face begrimed with sweat and burnt cork, with a half-eaten crust in his dirty hand, and his hair on end, fell into Reginald Carew's clean bed with its lace counterpane, and snuggling down under the pink silk eiderdown with his head tucked away on the lace-trimmed pillows, fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XX

THE silvery chime of the exquisite French ormolu clock on the mantelpiece was striking eleven next morning when Dixon woke up. His general allowance of sleep was six hours if he had had an extra hard day's work. For once in his life he had overstepped that margin by two hours and, in consequence, he felt as fresh as a child.

It took him quite a few minutes to realise what had happened and where he was, but gradually, bit by bit, the extraordinarily startling events of the night before pieced themselves together in his brain like a jig-saw puzzle, and the whole thing lay before his mental vision, everything in its place, each little detail fitting into the other little detail, until it made a picture after his own heart, exquisitely compact and neat.

The day was glorious. The blinds had not been drawn, so that he could see the blue sky from where he lay in bed. The window was open from top to bottom, and the air came in fresh and sweet. His awakening on that beautiful summer day seemed to him, after the terrible night he had passed through, almost like the glory of a resurrection from the dead.

He was so young, he was so strong, he had slept so peacefully, that, except for a certain extra sense of well-being, such as he experienced on Sunday mornings when he had worked late, and knew that the day was his own to do as he pleased, he really felt none the worse for what he had gone through.

Even his own disgustingly dirty condition did not trouble him, which showed, although he did not realise it, that perhaps he was not quite so recovered from the terrible strain to which he had been put as he thought. Heedless of his soiled hands, his strange pyjamas and his unwashed face, he just lay still under his pink silk counterpane, and his soul went up in thankfulness to Almighty God for His mercy, as he felt the joy of life and a sense of renewed vigour and strength flooding back into him again.

"Gollypots!" he said to himself, in his queer, whimsical way, "I can't afford a gilt bedstead and a pink silk eider-down for my own little woman, but it seems they're only just good enough for me!"

Tickled to death at the idea of his own luxurious state of blessedness, he snuggled his head a little farther into the monogrammed and lace-betrimmed pillows, and with a deep sigh of complete satisfaction glanced about the beautiful room.

Each dainty and elegant appointment struck him with a sense of fresh pleasure as his keen eyes, lazily observant, wandered from one thing to the other.

Silk hangings, dainty electric light shades, sparkling mirrors, exquisite furniture, perfectly appointed bed!—the whole thing formed so harmonious a combination of colour and beauty that his artistic soul rejoiced to find himself there. "*I'm* the only thing out of keeping," he said to himself, grinning at the thought. "Gollypots! I *must* look queer!"

He was right. He did *look queer*.

To begin with, he had on a bright blue cotton coat with red stripes running into complicated stars, suitable for a nigger on the Margate sands. The effect of this charming garment, opened at the throat sufficiently to show his own high, double collar and his filthy shirt, was, to say the least of it, striking in the extreme. As for his face!—the less said of that the better! The perspiration and the burnt cork had mingled sweetly together and coursed down his

ingenuous countenance, producing a furrow of black. The effect was as startling as it was unique. The remains of the artistic touches which had transformed his happy English face into the sinister obliqueness of an Oriental, had elaborated itself into one huge smudge of black, out of which his blue eyes sparkled and shone with the most incongruous effect. The tip of his fine nose shone out from amidst this wilderness of grime and filth, a startling white. His close-cropped hair, which he had rumped so often in his perplexity during the thrilling events of the night, stood up on end, in the tightly crisp curls which he hated and the Plump Little Party adored. Here and there it was quite black; here and there it shone red with the scarlet henna which had come off his hands. As for his hands themselves!—they were a cross between a manicurist's who had dropped her powder-box over her fingers, and a sweep's. The sight of them lying on the pink silk eiderdown added the final touch to the bizarre beauty of a *tout ensemble* which a Post-Impressionist would have given his life to reproduce.

Dixon, however, was not thinking of Post-Impressionists, or of colour effects. He was quite content to lie there and rejoice in the mere fact of being alive.

It is true he was terribly hungry, but he was too lazy to get up and ring the bell. It is true he hated being dirty, but he was too idle to turn on the taps in the bathroom and wash.

It is true there were a thousand and one things awaiting his urgent attention—the girl and her mother at his own rooms; the little woman at Brixton, waiting with her ear at the telephone; the chauffeur waiting below for his five-pound note. There was also the item of reporting himself and his doings to the man with the deep-set eyes. Yet further, there was the other little matter of elucidating this intricate mystery, and tracking it down to its final end.

Mortimer Dixon realised all these things, but they did not move him a jot. "I don't care a damn for the whole blessed caboodle," he said to himself happily. "I'm not going to move for anyone. As a matter of fact, I expect it will be years, if not centuries, before I feel inclined to get up."

The door of his bedroom opened, and the charwoman whom he had last seen in the laundry came in.

To say her face was a study is not to describe it at all!

She stood stock-still with her hand on the door handle,

her breath coming and going in gasps, reminding him pleasantly enough of his own experiences of semi-suffocation the night before in the taxicab. Her face went white. Her face went red. Her eyes opened, and opened, until Dixon, who was enjoying himself immensely, began to lay bets with himself as to how long it would take before they fell out of her head. The wider she opened her eyes, the higher her indignation grew. He could see it mounting in ever-receding waves of colour in her coarse, but comely, face.

"If she doesn't speak pretty soon," he said to himself, chuckling inwardly, "that pretty lambkin will bust!"

Perhaps the pretty lambkin was of the same opinion, for at that moment she spoke. "'Oever are *you*?" she burst out."

"I'm Mortimer Dixon."

The woman's face assumed a purplish hue. "Wotever are you a-doin' of lyin' in Mr Carew's bed?"

"I'm a friend of Mr Carew's. He very kindly invited me to stay here to-night."

The charwoman let go of the door, and with her arms akimbo advanced a few steps into the room. "Where's Mr Carew?" she demanded truculently.

Dixon lay back on his pillows, and surveyed her with lordly ease. "As far as I know, my lovely one, Mr Carew is in Berlin."

The woman's face, which had gone white again, turned a dull crimson. "'Ere, none of your lip and thank yer kindly," she said sharply. "How did yer get in?"

"Through the door, my only love," quoth Dixon. "It's a little way I have."

"You and your little ways had better be careful," the woman said angrily, "or I'll fetch the perlice."

"Fetch away," returned Dixon gaily. "It's the only thing I want to complete my perfect happiness—the police."

The woman came a few steps nearer. "'Oo opened the door to you?"

"My fairy queen!" said he, laying his filthy hand upon his heart and bobbing his head towards her in what was supposed to be an elegant bow. "The latchkey."

The woman's dull eyes snapped like a vicious cur's. "Then it was you left the key in the door?" she demanded.

Instantly, to his own intense vexation, he recollected that was exactly what he had done.

"Did I leave the key in the door? Idiot! so I did!" In his vexation he sat upright, disclosing a further view of his marvellous costume.

The red stars and the filthy shirt were too much for the charwoman. "I don't believe a word of it," she gasped. "I'm going to fetch the 'all porter, I am." She turned on her heel and fled.

Dixon lay back on his pillows and laughed till he thought he should have died. "Gollypots! the old girl doesn't recognise me!" he shouted, in a perfect ecstasy of delight. "It's too good to be true." So tickled was he at the thought of the charwoman's face, that he was still laughing when she and the hall porter arrived.

"Good-morning," said Dixon pleasantly.

The man, like the charwoman before him, stared with all his eyes. "Bless me! is it *you*, sir?"

"Yes," returned Dixon pleasantly. "It's me."

"'Oo is 'e?" said the charwoman viciously.

"It's Mr Dixon," answered the hall porter. Then his hand went to his head and he began to scratch it. "Leastways, I *suppose* it is." He looked doubtfully at the marvellous figure in the bed.

"It's me right enough," returned Dixon, who was enjoying himself madly. "Mortimer Dixon, my cherished one!" He extracted a filthy paw from under the pink silk quilt and wagged it at the outraged charwoman. "But to those who love me, 'Morty,' for short."

The hall porter began to snigger. "You're a rare one for a joke, aren't you, sir?" he chuckled. "Lord! what a night you must 'ave 'ad."

You should have seen Dixon's face as he addressed the hall porter with the solemnity of a Solon.

"My friend," he said, extending the other filthy hand as if in benediction, "I have."

"Bin to a fancy-dress ball in Covent Garden, sir?" the man asked him.

Dixon shifted his gay glance to the charwoman. "No, my friend; a fancy-dress ball down Whitechapel way."

His little ruse succeeded beyond his highest anticipations.

As the word came out of his lips, the woman bleached to a deadly white. "I don't believe a word of it," she shouted

furiously. "It's a put-up job between you two; that's wot it is." She turned on the hall porter like a vixen.

"Stoopid!" the man snapped back at her, "it's Mr Dixon right enough."

"And 'oo's Mr Dixon, I should like to know?"

"Oh! call me Morty!" came in impassioned tones from the incorrigible young lunatic in the bed.

But the charwoman was not going to be put off in any such fashion by any lunatic, however engaging.

She turned to the hall porter, repeating her demand.

"Keep your 'air on!" the man said to her reprovingly. "I tell you, it's all right. The gentleman's a friend of Mr Carew's, and he's put his flat at his disposal while he's abroad. He sent me 'is instructions on a card."

"I ain't 'ad no instructions. Thankin' yer kindly, I'd like to see that card."

Both man and woman turned with one accord to the shocking spectacle in the bed.

"It's over there, my angelic one, in my coat-pocket beside the bed." Dixon waved his hand to the chair where, under ordinary circumstances, his clothes would have been. Then he realised that he had left his coat behind with all its identifying belongings in that secret and terrible house.

"I don't see no coat." The charwoman's eyes, restless and alive with sullen fury, darted from the empty chair, and fastened themselves to Dixon's face.

"I left it behind me," said he, with a stately dignity which did not go very well with his nigger coat, "at a friend's house."

"Friend my foot!" screamed the charwoman. "You're an imposter, that's wot you are! You clear out of this. I'm not going to 'ave any dirty lunatics in this flat without Mr Carew tells me."

"Stop it!" cried the hall porter, catching her by the arm. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I *do* know wot I'm sayin'," she returned angrily. "I'm sayin' I won't 'ave any impostors in 'ere a-stealin' of my employer's things. *I'm* in charge of this flat, I am."

"No, you're not. It's me what's left in charge."

"Not of this flat! If you think I'm a-goin' to stand by and see all my master's things stolen under my very eyes you're very much mistaken."

"Who's talking of stealing, you idiot!" cried the hall porter. "This gentleman is Mr Carew's friend."

"Then if he is, why don't he show his card? I 'aven't 'ad any instructions! 'Ow should I know 'oo 'e is? 'E don't look like one of Mr Carew's friends, do 'e? 'E's an impostor, that's wot 'e is. 'Ere, you come out of it, I say!" she hurled herself in front of the hall porter, and snatched at the sheets.

The hall porter seized her by the arm like a vice. "Stop it, do you hear. This is Mr Carew's friend right enough. If you don't believe me, read this." He put his hand into his waistcoat pocket and took out a telegram. "There's your instructions," he said roughly. The charwoman snatched the piece of paper from his hand.

"So you *did* wire to Berlin after all, did you?" said Dixon, mightily pleased at the turn of events.

The man turned to him in a half-shamefaced way. "I hope you won't hold it up against me, sir, but"—he hesitated—"I talked it over with the missis, and I came to the conclusion it was my duty so to do, and so I wired last night. I hope you aren't angry, sir?"

"Angry?" shouted Dixon. "I'm eternally grateful." He sat upright in bed. "Always do your duty, my friend," he said solemnly. "If you hadn't wired to Berlin I might at this moment be pirouetting down the stairs of Dashley Gardens, in blue cotton pyjamas, instead of being free to take my ease in this extremely delightful bed." He turned his gay blue eyes on the charwoman, who still stared stupidly at the paper in her hand. "Are you quite satisfied that I am not a snatcher of the lordly umbrella, or a sneaker of the gentle spoon?" he asked her politely.

"I s'pose it's all right," she muttered vindictively. Then she looked at Dixon. "'Ow long are ye goin' to stay?"

"My pretty poppet!" he answered her gaily, "if the gods are good, a happy, happy month we two, alone, *together!*" As if the thought were too much for him, he bounced his head back into the pillows and laughed until he cried.

The charwoman jerked a contemptuous thumb in the direction of the heaving clothes. "Is 'e drunk or mad?" she asked the hall porter.

"He ain't no more drunk than I am, and if you was as mad as 'e is, it'd be a jolly good thing for you," the hall

porter answered her shortly. It was not only of the half-sovereign, so easily earned the day before, that he was thinking, but he was of a whimsical turn of mind himself, and Dixon's somewhat out-of-the-way humour was after his own heart.

"You should have just seen 'im playin' up!" he told his wife later, relating the incident with great gusto. "'E 'adn't been to no fancy-dress ball no more'n wot I 'ad. He's one of those music-hall gents, bless your heart, and it was just his way of passing it off that 'e 'adn't washed his face!"

Meantime, Mortimer Dixon was still happily tormenting the charwoman when the little clock on the mantelpiece struck the half-hour. He wriggled himself into a sitting position and waggled his hand gaily at her, after the old-time fashion of a troubadour.

"Fair lady, I prithee, withdraw!" he entreated her. "This gentile and parfite knight is about to arise."

The woman, who did not understand a word he was saying, understood the meaning of his indicating finger quick enough, and, throwing up her head in a kind of outraged fury, promptly withdrew.

CHAPTER XXI

DIXON jumped out of bed, and went and looked at himself in the glass. At the sight of his own reflection he was so stupefied that he could hardly believe it was himself. Then, gradually, as one beauty after another dawned upon him, he subsided into a chair and rolled about helpless in a paroxysm of delight.

When he had laughed himself tired, he tiptoed to the connecting door which led into the bathroom, and pushed it open sharp and strong. The swish of a departing petticoat told him all he wanted to know. "Listening at the door, was she?" he ejaculated to himself. "Good."

It seems a strange thing to say of a practical twentieth-century journalist, but so superstitious was Dixon, that his first little move in the game having succeeded, seemed to him a good omen that augured as well for his success, as the sun promised well for the glory of the day.

About an hour later he emerged from his room bathed,

shaved, immaculate, clothed in his right mind, and in a suit of Carew's clothes. "I wonder if she'll recognise me now," he said to himself. He tiptoed down the corridor, opened the baize door noiselessly, and went into the kitchen.

The charwoman, with her back to the door, stood at the gas stove cooking something in a frying-pan. "Didn't you hear the bell?" said Dixon, who hadn't rung it.

The woman turned sharply at the sound of his voice, and her eyes glued themselves to his face. So great was her consternation that she stood there with the rasher of bacon suspended on a fork in one hand, and the frying-pan in the other, her face as white as a sheet. "*You!*" she ejaculated. Before she had time to realise what she was saying, she let the frying-pan fall to the floor.

"*Me,*" said Dixon quietly. He came forward, and, stooping, picked up the frying-pan, and held it out to her. "What's up?"

"That's wot I want to know," gasped the charwoman. "You're the gentleman that was down at the laundry the day before yesterday."

"Even so," Dixon answered her pleasantly. "And what if I am?"

The charwoman gasped. "And wot are you a-doin' of 'ere," she cried vehemently. "Ain't you done enough mischief as it is, comin' down there and upsettin' 'im at the laundry, without your comin' 'ere and upsettin' me in this 'ere flat."

"I was not aware that I had upset either you or your excellent husband," he answered, in his most airy way. "By the way, where is he?"

"W'ere's 'oo?"

"Your excellent husband."

"'Ow should I know where 'e is?" Again, before she realised what she was saying, the words were out of her mouth.

"A wife not know where her husband is!" said Dixon, with mock surprise. "Come now, where is he?"

"I dunno, I tell yer." Her voice, under the stress of excitement, rose almost to a scream.

"Perhaps you would be good enough to give me his address?"

"I dunno 'is address, and I wouldn't give it *you* if I did,"

she retorted. "So there now. Wot's 'e got to do with you?"

"Nothing." Dixon advanced, and put the frying-pan down on the table in his best manner. "It's I who have something to do with him."

"And wot do you want with 'im, pray? 'E ain't a-goin' to wash *your* shirts, and don't you think it."

"I'm not asking him to wash my shirts. I'm asking you to give me his address."

"And I'm tellin' you I 'aven't got it."

"That's a pity," said Dixon quietly, as if to himself. "I wanted to see him so badly."

"Then you'd better go and look."

"I *have* looked."

The quiet words, so quietly spoken, had such an effect on the woman that the earth might have opened at her feet ready to swallow her up. "You've looked?" she stammered.

"I have."

"Looked where?"

"Where should I look but in the place where I expected to find him?"

"You mean the laundry?"

"The laundry is the place I mean."

The woman went white as a turnip. "Wot did you find there?"

"Exactly what I expected." Dixon's blue eyes danced with amusement. "Nothing." To his dismay, the fork with the bacon fell clattering into the sink, and the woman, falling into a chair, covered her face with her apron and burst into a paroxysm of tears.

So dumbfounded was he, that he stood staring at her with the amazed expression of a child when it has inadvertently smashed a new toy.

This was no play-acting for his benefit. The tears were genuine. His sensibilities were too keen for him not to recognise that he was witnessing a totally unrehearsed passion of grief. He laid his hand on her shoulder. "Come," he said gently, "tell me what's wrong."

The woman moved restlessly from under his hand, and sobbed more bitterly than before. "Come now," he said, still more gently. "Tell me, where is your husband?"

From behind the apron came the smothered response : " I tell yer I don't know."

" Do you mean to say he's left you ? "

The woman gave a little moan so pitiful that it cut Dixon to the heart.

" Why did he leave you ? "

" It wasn't 'is fault ; 'e couldn't help 'isself."

" A man can always help himself," he said sternly. " If he has been brute enough to leave you without even a word of warning, he isn't worth a thought, let alone crying for."

The woman tore her apron from her eyes and jumped to her feet. " Don't you say a word against him. I won't 'ave it. I can't bear it. 'E wiss the best, the dearest, the kindest 'usband any woman ever 'ad." She relapsed into the chair again.

" Then if he's all you say," Dixon answered her quietly, " I wonder he didn't tell you he was going away."

" 'E didn't know hisself 'e was going."

" Do you mean somebody came and took him away ? "

But this time Mortimer Dixon went a little too far.

Torn though the woman was by her own pain, she shut up instantly and he realised that he would not get another word out of her. " I mean 'e's gone away, and there's an end of it."

" And a nice end for you," he replied, purposely misunderstanding her. " Use you as long as it suited his purpose, and then leave you in the lurch."

But the woman was not to be caught napping again. " And if 'e did leave me, 'e'd a right to," she cried. " Why shouldn't 'e leave me if he chose to ? A man's free, ain't 'e ? "

" Not if he has a wife."

" 'E 'asn't a wife."

" I thought *you* were his wife."

" Then you thought wrong."

There was a dead pause. Even in the midst of his triumph he felt something of that compunction that comes to even the hardest-hearted hunter when he sees the beast he has been tracking, helpless under his knife.

The charwoman got up heavily. She dabbed her eyes with the corner of her apron and, drawing her hand across the lower part of her face, sniffed loud and long. " Well," she said slowly, " there's an end of that." She went to the

table and picked up the frying-pan. "'Ow long did you say you was going to stay?'"

"A month."

The woman had herself well in hand, but there was no mistaking the ferocity of her look when she heard those simple words. "Wot do yer have for yer breakfast?"

"Anything I can get."

"There's next to nothing in the 'ouse."

"What price bacon and eggs?"

"There's only two rashers that I got in for myself."

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to get in some more. I'm so hungry I could eat a whole pig, not to say a farmyard full of eggs."

The woman glowered at him suddenly. "I'll send the 'all porter's wife to get 'em."

"Why not go yourself?"

"I've too much to do."

"Do it later," said Dixon pleasantly.

The woman positively glared at him. "I ain't engaged to run messages. I'm 'ere to clean and cook."

"In that case," he said, watching her closely, "I'm afraid during Mr Carew's absence that I shall have to engage someone else." The effect of his words was electrical. The woman's colour came and went as it had done when she first recognised him. She caught her breath, turned white, and before he realised what she was doing had flung herself on his arm.

"Ah, don't send me away, sir!" she implored, clutching at his sleeve. "I'll serve you on my hands and knees, but, for God's sake, let me stay here."

"I'll pay you your wages just the same, you silly woman."

"It's not the wages," the woman said wildly. "I want to stay 'ere. I've served Mr Carew and his aunt before him, true and faithful for eight years, and it'll break my heart to leave."

"I'm not asking you to leave. You can take a nice holiday for a month and come back as soon as Mr Carew returns."

"I don't want no 'oliday. I want to stay 'ere and do my work, same as before."

"Very well," said Dixon slowly. "In that case we must get someone else in, to run in and out and fetch what's required."

The woman jumped to her feet as if she had been shot. "I don't want no one else in. I won't 'ave no one else in. I can do wot's required myself."

"But you said just now you couldn't run out for messages."

"Then I said wrong. I can and I will." Her voice took on again a note of passion. "Only keep me on, sir. Only let me stay on 'ere. I'm a good cleaner, sir, and a good cook."

"And a good temper?" he asked quizzically.

The woman flushed a deep crimson. "No, sir; I ain't got a good temper, and I acknowledge it. The fact is, I was a bit put about seein' you, and wot with this comin' on the top of the other, I forgot myself. I beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure. I 'umbly beg yer pardon."

He could see her hands nervously working under her apron.

"You sha'n't have any further cause for complaint, sir, if only you'll let me stay."

Dixon was only hard as far as his work was concerned. When it came to anyone in distress, especially a woman—even if that woman were red-faced, stout, and dropped her aitches—he was as tender as a girl. He laid his hand gently on the heaving shoulder, and patted it. "My dear soul," he said slowly, "I was only teasing you. You may stay here for ever as far as I'm concerned, and you sha'n't go any messages either. I'll fetch in whatever I want myself."

For the second time within twenty-four hours Dixon felt his hand snatched and a woman's kisses and tears imprinted on it. "Gawd bless yer, sir, Gawd bless yer," she kept on saying over and over again.

"Here, don't be too generous with your blessings," he said, drawing his hand away. "At the best, I sha'n't be here more than three days."

There was no mistake about it *this* time, the woman started as if he had struck her. "Only three days, sir? You said a month."

"I say lots that I don't mean," he replied good-humouredly. "When you get to know me better you'll soon find that out. Now I'll go and put on my hat and sally forth, and buy bacon and eggs."

"No, that yer sha'n't." The woman darted by him, snatched her bonnet from the peg behind the door, and had

it on her head and was tying the strings before he had time to move. "I'll fetch you whatever you want, sir. I'll run messages for you all the bloomin' day. Don't you worry about giving me no orders, sir. I know exactly what gentlemen like. I'll 'ave as fine a breakfast as yer can get in London on the table before you can say 'knife.'" She darted out of the kitchen and down the corridor. Dixon heard the clicking of the front door before he had recovered from his surprise.

He dropped down on one of the kitchen chairs and rumbled up his hair. "Well, I'm blest," he ejaculated, "if this isn't the rummiest go of all! Now, what on earth does all this mean?" He rose to his feet and began restlessly pacing to and fro. "The Chinaman's left her. She's not his wife. She said she was, and she says she isn't. One way or the other, she lied. It's not the wages she's thinking of. And she doesn't want to take a holiday for a month. And though she's not thin, and fat people don't like to work in the heat, she doesn't want anyone here to help with the work. And she wished me at the bottomless pit of destruction when I said I was going to stay a month. And now there's nothing she won't do for me, when she hears I'm only going to stay for three days. There is something more in this than meets the eye, or I'm a Chinaman." He stopped short and his eyes dilated. "I'd give a good deal to know where Mr Chin-Chin-Chinaman happens to be. He's not in the laundry, and he's not in his coffin."

At the thought of that part of his journey in it, when his head was upside down, Mortimer Dixon began to laugh.

Standing there in the spotless little kitchen, with the bright sun streaming in, and the fresh air coming in through the open windows, and the sound of the birds singing in the gardens outside, it seemed impossible to realise that such things as he had gone through the night before could happen in real life. Yet they had happened, and, for all he knew, before he had finished the work he had set his hand to, they might happen yet again.

Standing there in the sunlight, with the frying-pan on the table, and the rasher of bacon in the sink, he wondered what further exciting episodes Fate might still have in store for him in connection with this extraordinary chase. "Anyway," he said to himself gaily, "the worst is over. If I've

gone through what I did go through last night, and am alive to tell the tale, I've nothing to fear."

"Boasters borrow
Sorrow to-morrow!"

The old Spanish proverb flashed across his mind, but he dismissed it with a laugh. "Let sorrow come to-morrow," he told himself. "I don't care!"

Meantime, to-day was his, and he meant to make the most of it. The first thing to do was to write to the Plump Little Party at Brixton, who probably had been waiting with her ear to the telephone for the last two hours.

He went back to the bathroom and washed his hands.

As he did so, he cast a glance at the bath. For two pins he would have whipped off his clothes and got into the water again. Probably it was only his imagination, but he still fancied that he smelt of the spices and the incense amongst which he had lain during the night. He promised himself that he would find out from the first man he met, whether it was his fancy or not. He raised his hands to his face and smelt them. The soap he was using was erasmic, and the soap he had used in his bath was carbolic. Yet, to his keen nose there seemed to linger about him in some indescribable way, that unclean smell of Eastern spices and pungent aromatic perfume, which turned him physically sick.

He smelt his hands. He smelt the soap. He put his face down and smelt the soap-suddy water. He smelt the towel on which he had dried his hands. He went over to the bath, and smelt the slab of carbolic soap. All homely, simple, wholesome, English, clean-smelling stuff, and yet there persisted that exotic smell. It was extraordinary.

"It must have got into my very system," he told himself impatiently. "This afternoon I'll go and have a Turkish bath." He threw the towel impatiently on to the towel rail and went into the room which was dignified by the name of library.

The curtains were drawn, the blinds were up, the window was open, and the sun streamed in. So engrossed had he been with his own thoughts as he opened the door that he did not give a thought to the appalling tragedy which had been enacted there, and had so impressed his psychic consciousness the day before.

But as he sat there, in the dead man's chair, waiting for

the telephone to answer his call, the same acute sensation that had overwhelmed him came over him again like a wave.

It was an extraordinary sensation. Not depression, not fear, not excitement, and yet a combination of all three. Sitting there at the table, as the dead man must have sat a hundred times before him, with the receiver to his ear, he seemed to hear sounds, as of someone noiselessly moving. Once, for it was quite a few minutes before he got through to Brighton, he imagined he detected a groan. That finished him.

"I'm as fanciful as a girl," he told himself furiously. "If I let myself run out of hand like this, if I come in here at night when all is still, I shall be fancying I feel the face of that poor, dead devil under my foot, just as the hall porter described." He shuddered at the thought. Undoubtedly the man's story, told in his commonplace way, had taken a strong hold on Dixon's highly sensitive brain.

The voice of the Plump Little Party coming over the wires, soft and clear, quite apart from his own joy at hearing her speak, came to him as a relief.

"I can't tell you a thing," he began, "except that I'm all right. How are you?"

"I'm all right, Morty."

"You don't sound all right. What's the matter with you? How did you sleep?"

"Not very well."

"Why not?"

"I had such a horrible dream about you. I thought you were in danger."

"When did you think that?"

"It began about ten o'clock and lasted till about half-past two. I couldn't rest. It was dreadful."

"And after half-past two?"

"Then I felt easier, and I went to sleep."

Dixon asked himself if this could be mere coincidence. Without question, his life had been in danger—in grave and terrible danger—from ten till half-past two.

"Well, I'm not in any danger now, am I?" he answered gaily. "I've had a splendid sleep, and I'm so hungry it's a good thing you're not here, or I should eat you. Now, listen to me quietly and do exactly as I tell you. I can't tell you about things over the telephone, and I can't see you to-day. I've got to write to tell you something, too. Take

the letter up to your bedroom ; read it, and burn it as soon as read. Keep out in the open air all day, and get hold of somebody, and go for a ride on top of a bus. I can't stay any longer now, but I'll ring you up again to-night. Now I'm going to speak more softly. Can you hear me ? ”

“ Yes, Morty.”

“ Then listen ! I've been a beast ! Can you forgive me ? ” His voice was a whisper, but she heard him all right.

“ Oh, Morty ! ”

“ A horrible, disgusting, sickening beast ! ” said Dixon, piling on the agony. “ But I'll tell you all about that in my letter. I adore you. Good-bye.”

“ Oh, Morty, do be careful ! ”

The sweet little voice trailed away in the distance. He waited until he heard the connection cut, and then he hung the receiver up.

Wonderful is the power of imagination. Though they were separated by at least four miles, it seemed to the young journalist as if he held the girl he loved in his arms.

The happy interlude over, the depression returned again. “ I can't stand this beastly room,” he said to himself. He snatched the blotter and some paper, and made for the door.

In the corridor he met the charwoman returning laden with parcels. She stood alertly aside to let him pass. Dixon's keen eyes scanning her face noticed the change in it. “ There's sorrow in the eyes, but hope in that face,” he said to himself. “ I wonder why.”

“ Yer breakfast'll be ready for yer in about ten minutes, sir,” said the charwoman.

“ Good. It can't be ready sooner than I am.”

While the bacon was frizzling, Dixon sat down to write his letter. This is what he wrote :—

“ MY OWN LITTLE GIRL,—I love you.

“ I've had a beast of a time, but I'm quite safe.

“ *I've found what I was looking for. What-ho !*

“ I don't know when I shall see you or where I shall be, but I'm going to get there this time, with both feet.

“ Yesterday I saw a girl—the prettiest girl I'd ever seen in my life. She broke her pearls and I picked them up for her. If it hadn't been for you, I should have proposed to her on the spot.

“ In the evening, I met another girl. She was beautiful,

and as plucky as a man. I wanted to kiss her, almost, but not quite as badly as I want to kiss you.

"This is not fun, but horribly true.

"Now you see what a beast I am!

"Oh, my little girl, I'm ashamed to tell you this, but I must.

"It's no temptation to me to steal, or to tell lies, or to do a thousand and one other things that tempt other men, but when it comes to women . . .

"My sweet, if it wasn't for you, I'd go under.

"For God's sake hold on to me, stick to me, keep me up to it. Stand by me, or down I shall go.

"Even when I'm married to you there will always be the same ghastly danger. I shall never really be sure of myself until I die.

"I've told you all this before, but I tell it to you again.

"Realise it! Realise it! Realise! Before it's too late.

"Yes, there is no doubt about it, I'm a *beast*. My strength I keep for myself. My weakness I keep for you.

"Yet the thought of *you* pulled me through last night, and, if you'll stand by me, please God, I'll always pull through.

"But supposing I don't?

"The French have a saying that 'to understand is to forgive.'

"I take your little hands in mine, I look into your sweet true eyes, in which there's not an unholy thought. I lay my lips on your sweet mouth, which has never spoken an unkind word.

"Ah, my little love, I'm a beast, but I love you.

"Send me one word to say you understand. I am,

"YOUR MORTY.

"P.S.—The second girl is engaged to a rotter who thinks of her as I think of you. She has splendid eyes, but they are not so sweet as yours.

"P.S. 2.—I've got something more for your museum. Not much, still something. A long black hair.

"P.S. 3.—Carew has roses in his room and a pink silk counterpane. Darling, darling, *darling!* that made me think of you."

Dixon put this characteristic effusion into an envelope and sealed it.

Then the charwoman called him to breakfast, and he went into the little dining-room and sat down to eat.

CHAPTER XXII

GODS, was he hungry! a dyspeptic American millionaire would have given ten thousand pounds for an appetite like this. Such bacon! Such coffee! Such toast! Such poached eggs! However far the charwoman might have deviated from the paths of righteousness in other directions, she certainly spoke the truth as to her powers as a cook. The meal was served to perfection. Dixon, who was a bit of an epicure, told himself he could not have got it better if he had been breakfasting at the Savoy.

In the middle of it the hall porter telephoned up to say that a taxicab was waiting below.

"Ask him to keep an eye on the cab, and send the man up," Dixon said to the charwoman, who appeared, in addition to her talents as a cook, to be able to use the 'phone.

In less than two minutes the man came in.

"Good-morning," said Mortimer Dixon. "You look nice and fresh." It was true. No one looking at the chauffeur, spruce, shaved and spotless, would have dreamed he had gone to bed at three and got up at seven. "Hungry?"

"No, thank you, sir. I was when I woke, but now I'm full up."

"I wish to God I were," said Dixon, laughing. "Shove that marmalade along and pass the toast." The man complied. "How much do you reckon to make on a good day?" said Mortimer Dixon, with his mouth full.

"Profit, sir?"

Dixon nodded. He was too engrossed with toast and marmalade to speak.

"Between ten to twelve shillings, sir."

"Look here, I'll give you a quid a day over and above all your expenses, if you'll hold yourself entirely at my disposal for the next few days."

"Right, sir."

Dixon took out his card, scrawled a few words and gave it to the man. "Take this"—he stooped and looked over his shoulder—"you know—where you dropped us last night.

Give it to the hall porter, and tell him to give it to Mr Dixon's aunt."

"Very good, sir."

"She'll give you a letter for me and a list of anything she may want. Get whatever she tells you. Have them all packed in one parcel, and take them back."

"Very good, sir."

"Then come back here and wait for me. Not up to the door, you understand, but somewhere, just near, where I can spot you—and hang about."

"I'd rather have more definite instructions, sir."

"Come here." Dixon pushed back his chair and, with his serviette in his hands, went through the open French window on to the balcony, followed by the man. "Round that corner, see?" he pointed.

"Very good, sir. Is that all, sir?"

"That's all, thank you." Dixon replied idly. "No, it isn't," he called out. "I want you to smell my hand."

"Smell your hand, sir?"

"That's what I said," said Dixon truculently. "Take hold of it, man, and smell it." He extended his hand, enjoying the other's surprise.

The chauffeur, his face a study of bewilderment, advanced his face towards Dixon's finger-tips.

"No, no! Not like that! Take hold of the thing. Turn it about. Smell it, man. Smell it all over for all you're worth! Now, tell me what it smells of."

"Of soap, sir."

"What kind of soap?"

"I can't readily say, sir. Carbolic." He sniffed again. "Maybe some scent like eau-de-Cologne."

"Nothing like cloves or nutmegs?"

"No, sir." The man looked at Dixon as though he thought he had gone mad.

"No, I'm not mad," said Mortimer, laughing, "but I'm writing an article on noses, and I wanted to test yours."

"I see, sir. Is that all, sir?"

"That's all, thank you."

"Good-day, sir."

"Good-day."

The man disappeared; but Dixon, hungry though he still was, did not return to the room. He stood on the balcony, eyeing that little staircase which led up to the flat abutting

on to Carew's. Once again he read the directions which set forth it was only to be used in cases of emergency or fire. The morning light, bright and clear, struck on the sloping roof, silhouetting the whirling chimneypots of the next block of flats with extraordinary sharpness against the bright blue sky.

The cowls glittering and whirling seemed to fascinate him.

"If I were a burglar," he said to himself thoughtfully, "and after that young woman's pearls, I should get on to that roof, slide down until I came to the chimneypots, let myself on to the balcony, burgle at my ease, and calmly walk down those nice little stairs. Why the devil *I'm* not a burglar, I can't think. It's much easier than being a journalist!" He grinned to himself at the thought. "Now I come to think of it, why bother to get on the roof at all! Why not just walk through the hall when that nice hall porter is having his dinner and, at the time appointed, walk *up* those nice little stairs. Why on earth some enterprising young thief doesn't do it, I can't think. There must be some little difficulty at the bottom. I must ask Friend Porter about it when I see him downstairs."

While musing on the turn of chance which made one man a journalist and another man a thief, he returned to his breakfast with renewed appetite. He was just casting a longing eye on the empty dish when the door opened and the charwoman came in. In her hand she had a covered plate with some smoking rashers of bacon, and two poached eggs.

"Thought the others might have got cold, sir," she said affably. Her eyes went to the empty dish.

"They're not cold," he said, laughing, "but they're very lonely, very, *very* lonely!" He patted his great chest. "I see my friend Carew has trained you well, Mrs . . . Mrs . . ." He paused with an uplifted eye. "Mrs what?"

"Mrs nothing, sir. I'm a single lady. My name is," she gulped, "Thompson."

"Ah," said Dixon gravely. "Miss Thompson, thanks."

The woman gathered together the empty dishes and went out.

"Now why did she tell me that lie?" he asked himself, attacking the second lot of bacon and eggs. "There was no necessity for it. Is it constitutional?" He shook his head. "That's not the eye of the liar born. She hated

saying her name was Thompson. And not married?" His keen young face softened. "If ever there was passion and maternity written on any human countenance it is on hers. She probably has a husband, and about fifty children, tucked away somewhere in Whitechapel. It's just another little part of the riddle. I wonder what the dickens it all means." He laid down his knife and fork, finished his coffee and pushed back his chair. Then he rummaged about among Carew's pipes on the mantelpiece, selected one, and, throwing himself into one of the lounge-chairs on the balcony, he began to smoke.

Now was the perfect hour of repletion and repose when he could gather his thoughts together and not only go over the past events and arrange them with due regard to their proportionate value, each to the other, but also decide on what he was going to do.

But Mortimer Dixon neither thought of the past nor planned for the future. He was not like other men in the way he worked. Nor was he like other men in summing up events hoping to arrive at a logical conclusion. He had done what he had done and, when the time came, he was quite prepared to do what he had to do. For the time being he dismissed the whole thing from his mind so that it might become a perfect blank.

To look at him one would have thought that he was a young fellow belonging to the leisured, upper classes who had been up a little too late the night before and who had not a thing on his mind beyond recouping himself for the pleasure of the coming day. Unhappily, though the description would not have been exact materially, *mentally*, that was exactly how Dixon felt. His night's work had tried him more than he knew. He was overstrained and over-tired. He felt as if he never wanted to work again.

He watched the pigeons idly circling round the roofs. He wished he were a pigeon. He watched the busy little sparrows flitting in their friendly way on the eaves of the flats, and he wished he were a sparrow. He stretched his long legs out, and lay back, and stared up at the blue sky, and wished he were a cloud. He leant lazily over the balcony, and the cry of a coster with his barrow of gleaming fruit floated up to him, and he wished he were a strawberry! To lie in the cool, dark earth, and struggle, and strive, and burrow one's way up right through the blackness, until one came into the

light of day ! To feel oneself growing a sweet, tender green and be packed in cosy warm straw by a careful gardener. To burst into life one day, and find a great warm beneficent God laying golden life-giving hands around one's heart ! To feel oneself sprouting and waxing great, and to feel the joy of reproduction ! To watch the exquisite unfolding of the flower into the tiny green bud, which was to gradually develop into luscious scarlet fruit ; to live in the sunlight and become sweet and fragrant, a joy to the eye and the palate, to be picked, and travel far through the cool night into the wide world ! To lie in green leaves, glorified, in the shop window, the desired of all beholders, or to be trundled with one's fellows in a shining pyramid, through the London streets ! . . .

"Our eyes are holden that they may not see," said Mortimer Dixon to himself. "It's a good thing, for if we did realise what was going on in our midst, there'd be no work done in this wonderful world. We should all be on our knees, too busy praising God for his marvellous powers. There's a lesson in everything ; a thought in everything ; a miracle in everything." His eyes fell on the iron staircase. "There's a lesson in that, too," he told himself, "a particular, peculiar lesson, intended for me, if only my eyes were opened to see."

His eyes were no longer open ; they were shut. His pipe fell from his hand ; the circling pigeons, the flitting sparrows and the cries of the streets, blended together into an exquisite harmony. Words of a half-forgotten prayer he had learned at his mother's knee came unconsciously to his lips. He was fast asleep.

And, in the words of the prophet of old, in his sleep he dreamed a strange dream.

He dreamt he was sitting in Carew's smoking-room writing a letter. He could see his own hand holding the Dresden china penholder, and the last four words he had written : "*Now comes the end.*" As he looked, he had an extraordinary sensation of a presence beside his own in the room. He looked over his shoulder, but saw nothing. He went to the door and opened it, turned on the light, and looked up and down the corridor. There was no one there. In his dream he could hear the click of the fitting as he switched off the light, and went to the window, and looked out into the night. He saw himself let the curtain fall, return to the table and

take up his pen, but the inspiration to write further had gone. He just sat still in his chair and stared at the words before him: "Now comes the end."

He moaned uneasily in his sleep. In that "small death," as the spiritualists term the natural slumber of man, he had a confused sense that it was not he himself sitting in that chair writing those words, but that he, invisibly present, was accorded the privilege of looking on, and assisting at, the death anguish of another man.

The continuity of the dream thus broken, for an interminable time Dixon seemed to himself to first take on the spiritual individuality of the man who had taken his own life, and then resume his own personality, cool, determined and at peace with himself, setting forth a clear statement of something he had done, tabulating a series of incidents for someone else to read. This confusion of personalities, so common in dreams, did not confuse him at all; but one thing struck him as most extraordinary—that whether he were the man who had died, or whether he were himself who lived, the same mental distress in both cases continued the same. It was almost as if a dual personality, which included them both, had come into being; that not only the dead man, but also he, Mortimer Dixon, both sat in the same chair, at the same table, using the same pen, writing the same words, and pausing at the same moment, because to each of them, both the dead and the living, an end *had* come.

Mortimer Dixon ceased moaning. His lips ceased to twitch. His brow ceased to pucker. His fingers ceased to pick aimlessly at the chair. The confusion of mentalities had gone. He was sleeping peacefully again.

He took up his dream again, at the moment where he had dropped the window curtain. It seemed to him, that he came back to the table and sat down again, and placed his hand on the paper ready to write. In the subtle way known to all who dream vividly, he knew that he was alone in the flat. Yet there were sounds he could not account for: moanings, and footsteps, and finally words, distinct yet incomprehensible, uttered in a strange and yet a familiar voice. The signs of some human presence beside his own grew stronger and stronger. His eyes shifted themselves to the inner door. He saw the door swing noiselessly. He heard himself cry out loudly and strongly and spring to his feet.

The lights went out. There followed a confusion of horror and darkness. Then he came to himself, standing there in an anguish of terror, and his naked foot stepped on the unspeakable softness of a dead man's upturned face.

CHAPTER XXIII

Now Mortimer Dixon was one of those happy people who regain instant possession of their faculties the minute they awake from sleep. There was no transitional stage for him, across the abyss which separates the conscious from the unconscious self. The instant he opened his eyes he awoke to perfect possession of all his faculties, with the additional advantage, that each particular fraction of his brain was stimulated and refreshed, and sprang into active life doubly equipped for the fray.

For once, however, this was not the case. He awoke, indeed, to absolute self-possession, but the dream was still so strong upon him that it seemed as though it must be real. His hands were trembling. His forehead was damp with sweat. The face of the charwoman, staring down at him, fitted in so exactly that she seemed almost like part of his dream. It was with a great effort that he put his pipe in his mouth again, and reaching lazily for the matches, lighted it and began to smoke.

"You was asleep, sir. I hope I didn't wake you?" She regarded him with curious eyes.

"I'm jolly glad you did, for you rescued me from a horrible dream."

"I thought you must be dreaming, sir, for you called out more than once. That's what made me come in."

"I called out, did I?" said Dixon quietly. "I wonder I didn't yell the place down." Then a sudden thought struck him. "Do *you* dream?"

"Not before I come 'ere, sir."

"But since you've come here you do?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nice dreams?"

The woman shuddered. "'Orrible, sir."

He sat up. "I wonder why."

"I'm sure I can't tell you, sir."

"Your bed not comfortable?"

“ Very, thank you, sir.”

“ Perhaps you lie too high ? ”

“ P'r'aps so, sir.”

“ Or perhaps you eat too late at night.”

“ P'r'aps I do, sir.”

“ Or perhaps you ought to take a good meal just before you go to bed ? ”

“ P'r'aps I ought, sir.”

Dixon felt as if he was talking to a blank wall. “ Let's see,” he said, in his casual way—“ you sleep on the other side of the house, don't you ? ”

To his keen eye watching her covertly, there came a distinct change in the woman's face. “ Yes, sir—that is, sometimes I sleep in one room and sometimes in another, so as to keep the beds aired.” Her confusion was so marked that he asked himself whether she had someone in to sleep with her, or went home after the place was quiet, and did not sleep in the flat at all.

“ I wonder you aren't nervous, sleeping here, alone, in this great flat ? ”

“ Bless your 'eart, sir, sometimes I've slept alone, the summer through, in a great, big 'ouse.”

“ And yet you dream ? ” Dixon's eyes took on their alert look. “ It's generally only highly strung, nervous people who dream. What do you dream about ? ”

The woman's colour went from red to white, and white to red, as it had done before when they were talking in the kitchen. “ I can't rightly say, sir ; sometimes one thing and sometimes another. Silly kinds o' dreams, sir.”

“ But nearly always about one person—a person lying ill—a man about to die and afraid of death ? ”

The charwoman was a strong-made, heavily built woman, but it seemed to Dixon that she reeled on her feet. Her face was ashen-grey as she bent forward, clutching at the table between them. “ 'Oo told you that ? 'Ow do *you* know what I dream about ? ”

“ I know everything,” he said quietly.

“ Wot ? ”

“ The hall porter told me about Mr Warrington committing suicide in that room over there.”

“ *Mr Warrington.* ”

Dixon found it in his heart to pity the poor creature, grasping to get back her self-control.

"Why, what else did you think I meant?" he asked, in his pleasant, easy way.

"Oh yes, of course, sir. Quite so, sir. What else *could* I be thinking of, sir."

"Then why did you seem so surprised?"

"Me surprised, sir? Not at all, sir."

Dixon could almost see, as under a microscope, the mad effort the dull brain was making to retrieve its mistake.

"I didn't know as 'ow *you* knew, sir."

It was a gallant effort, but so far as Dixon went it was good. "I told you the hall porter told me."

Into the harassed face came a vindictive look. "That 'all porter 'e says more than 'is prayers by a long way," the charwoman said viciously. 'E's a meddlesome tittle-tattler, that's wot 'e is, not fit for the place 'e 'olds. As for his wife, a nice wife she is, I don't think. A sloppy slut, that's wot *I* calls 'er, with 'er 'air in curl papers 'alf the day, wot can't cook a chop or a rasher for nuts."

Unfortunately, Dixon was not to be drawn into a discussion of the sins of Mrs Hall Porter. He returned to the attack. "If Mr Carew knew about this suicide, he wouldn't stay in this place a day."

"And small blame to 'im, sir. I know *I* wouldn't if I could 'elp myself. I can't get it out of my 'ead, night or day. I wouldn't go into that there room alone at night, not if you paid me a million pounds. No, that I wouldn't. I feels that strung-up I think I can 'ear him creeping about and cryin'. It fair gives me the creeps, that it do." She shivered, and Dixon's quick eye took in the beads of perspiration on the high, narrow forehead as she spoke.

"Oh, so you've heard those sounds too?"

"Yes, I 'ave, sir; and wot's more"—she bent forward with a curiously eager look on her face—"I've seen 'im."

"Seen him? Do you mean Mr Warrington's ghost?"

"Yes, sir." The woman nodded vehemently. "Not, so to speak, the poor gentleman himself, sir, but just a shadder like." She waved her coarse hand suggestively and she bent still nearer. "It's *my* opinion this 'ere flat is 'aunted, sir."

Dixon stared at her in amazement. There is nothing more strange in the whole world of psychology than to hear an illiterate mouth speaking one's own unuttered thought. "I wonder you stay here?"

The woman stepped back. "It's a good place, sir, and Mr Carew's a good master. The likes o' me can't pick and choose as gentlefolk can. But ill luck comes to everybody who crosses this threshold, sir. You mark my words, for all his money and his gay ways, bad luck'll come to Mr Carew. That's why I was so pleased to hear you wasn't goin' to stop long, sir," she added ingratiatingly, "I'd be sorry to hear of anything 'appenin' to a clever young gentleman like you."

Like most intriguers, the woman overdid it. In her anxiety to attain her own ends without arousing Dixon's suspicions, she overshot her mark. "She wants to get rid of me," he said to himself. "She's up to something. I wonder what!"

"I'm glad myself that I'm not going to stay for long," he answered her pleasantly. "Pretty as it is, I've taken quite a dislike to this flat."

There was a pause.

Like a cessation of physical contact, he felt the woman, after her expansion, mentally withdraw into herself. "You won't be wanting lunch, sir, as you've breakfasted so late?"

"No, thanks."

"Shall I bring you a cup of tea about four o'clock, sir?"

"Thanks, if I'm in."

"Will you be dining in or out, sir?"

"In."

"Thank you, sir. Is that all, sir?"

"Yes, thanks, that's all."

"Thank you, sir." At the door she turned and came back. "Beggin' your pardon, sir," she hesitated. "About money, sir?"

"Money?"

"My account with you, sir?"

"Ah, yes, of course. How do you manage with Mr Carew?"

"Mr Carew give me a five-pound note, sir, and when it was done he give me another, sir."

"A most excellent way," said Dixon. "We had better do the same." His keen glance measured her. "I take it you kept a book."

"Of course, sir."

The answer was prompt, and her manner excellent, but Dixon had seen the look of dismay that leapt into her eyes.

"Another lie," he said to himself. "Carew never had a book in his life. Anything more?" he inquired pleasantly, as the charwoman didn't move.

"If it wouldn't be troublin' you too much, sir, if you could let me 'ave the money now."

By sheer force of habit he thrust his hand into his trousers pocket. It had entirely slipped his memory that he was wearing Carew's clothes, and not his own. He felt uncommonly like a fool as he withdrew his hand empty, and explained that he had no loose change, and must cash a cheque.

"I can get it cashed, sir." The woman said feverishly. "They're very obligin' in that way, us bein' such good customers at the stores close by."

Dixon felt himself going hot all over. Not only had he left himself without money, but he had not a cheque to draw. "Thanks, I'll cash it myself. I bank quite close here," he said easily. "I'll give you the money to-night."

A new expression flashed into the charwoman's eyes. It was not exactly suspicion. It was not exactly surprise. It was more like panic. It was another little signpost of warning on the road Dixon was travelling, but it was written in a language he did not understand.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but you won't forget," she added, with an elaborate effort at apology. "I never run credit for nothin'. Mr Carew insists on my always paying up on the spot."

"I won't forget," he assured her. "By the way, what's the name of those stores where you say I can get a cheque cashed?"

This time there was no mistake. It was panic, pure and simple, that blazed in the charwoman's eyes. "I don't suppose they'd do it for *you*, sir. You couldn't expect them to, not knowin' you, sir. But they'll do it for me in a minute. If you give me the cheque, I'll run and get it cashed with pleasure."

"Thanks," said Dixon politely, "but I've got to go to the bank myself." He rose to his feet and extinguished his pipe. The strong impression that the dream had made on his impressionable mind had vanished. His philosophical musing and his inertia alike had gone. He was himself, young and strong, and refreshed in body and soul. He was up against his work again.

He went into the corridor and put out his hand instinc-

tively, to take up his hat. To his instant vexation, the row of empty pegs confronted him. He realised that he had come home the night before with a bare head.

“P'r'aps you left your hat in your bedroom, sir?”

He turned sharply at the woman's voice. She stood at his elbow, and he detected, both in her voice and on her face, a malicious glee.

“Indeed! then I didn't do anything of the kind,” he answered her airily. “I left my hat in a place I should be sorry to give the address of to any of my acquaintances”—he bowed gallantly—“much less to an unmarried lady like you.”

The charwoman's dull eyes flashed. “P'r'aps, as you're wearin' Mr Carew's clothes, you'd like one of his 'ats as well?”

“I should, indeed,” said Dixon, radiant with good humour. “If he has got one fit to put on.”

They marched down the corridor together, the charwoman pushing herself past him in a markedly obtrusive way. At the door of the boxroom he stopped short. “Does Mr Carew keep his clothes in here?”

The woman turned on her heel and, stepping forward with her arms outstretched, stood thrusting her body forward, almost as if she were guarding the door. “No, sir, 'e don't. That's the boxroom.”

Dixon, who knew as well as she did what the room was, slipped his hand under her elbow, and made as if to turn the handle of the door. Instantly, the charwoman's hand swooped down and intercepted him. “Beggin' your pardon, sir, this door's kep' locked.”

“And suppose I want to see in,” he said coolly, “I take it you've got the key?”

For the second time that morning the charwoman's temper was too much for her. “And if I 'ave got it, wot business is it of yours?” she demanded, her voice rising shrilly as her excitement grew. “This is Mr Carew's flat this is, and 'e's give me no instructions to let strangers come a-pokin' of their noses into things as don't concern them. If you want the key of this 'ere room, you write to Mr Carew for it. You don't get it out of me.”

Dixon was so delighted with her fury, which betrayed so much more than she knew, he could have embraced her on the spot. It was with the greatest difficulty that he

regained his cold and stern demeanour of a few hours before.

"This is the second time you have seen fit to be impertinent to me," he said quietly. "I warn you, if you want to stay with me, you had better take care. If you have any doubt as to whether I am the person I am supposed to be, in Mr Carew's flat by Mr Carew's express permission and desire, you have only to communicate with Mr Carew at the address he gave you in Berlin, or with Mr Carew's aunt, Miss Pembroke, in Phillimore Place, Kensington, who knows me quite well. If you don't wish to continue in my employment during the month I am here, you are perfectly free to go, and I will get other servants in. If, however, as you told me in the kitchen just now, you wish to stay, then you must be good enough to control your temper, for if I am subjected to this annoyance a third time, no matter how sorry you are, you'll have to go."

The woman listened to him in silence, then, with a kind of wailing cry, she turned her face to the door, and, hiding her eyes in the crook of her arm, which she still held extended across the door, she burst into a passion of tears.

This time, however, Dixon was not taking any. He had spoken as he had spoken, with deliberate intention. To commiserate or pity was to undo what he had done. He turned on his heel and went into his bedroom, snatching the first hat of Carew's he laid his hand on, hardened his heart, and went out, leaving her sobbing piteously on the mat.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE first thing his eyes fell on was the chauffeur of the taxicab. He went up to him and gave him the letter he had written to his sweetheart at Brixton. "Take this letter to this address, and wait for an answer," he said quietly. "Got any money on you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give me some, just a few shillings to go on with. I left all I had in my coat-pocket last night."

"Not much, I hope, sir?"

For the first time it struck Dixon that, in that coat-pocket, he had left his ten five-pound bank-notes.

"All the chairs and tables I'm likely to get this side of

Jordan," he said grimly to the taxi-driver. "If I'd done what I wanted to, I shouldn't have lost 'em. Hang being virtuous! it don't pay." He took the loose change the man handed him. "Keep your eyes open, there's a good chap. Give this letter into the young lady's own hand. See how she looks before she's read it; see how she looks after she's read it."

"Very good, sir; I understand."

"Good man! I suppose you're engaged too?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I hope to God you behave yourself better than I do."

"I don't find it none too easy, sir," the man said, grinning.

"Easy, do you call it!" cried Mortimer Dixon. "It isn't as difficult to find out who killed Cock Robin as it is for some people to be good." He jammed his hat on his head and, in a fury of nervous excitement, swung away from the cab, and took his long legs down the street.

It was midday. The sun was very hot and there were very few people about. "All indoors eating strawberries and cream, or snoring," he said to himself savagely. "Greedy, somnolent beasts!" The sight of a policeman, red in the face and obviously bad-tempered, restored him to his own genial self.

"I've got a commission from a lady," he said in his best manner, "to make some purchases for her at some infernal stores in this God-forsaken neighbourhood. I haven't the faintest idea what the name is. Perhaps you can tell me the address?"

"I'm not 'ere to find addresses," snapped the policeman, who was very hungry, and also very hot.

Dixon produced half-a-crown of the taxi-driver's money. "Oh," he said innocently, "I thought you were here for the purpose of helping young men from the country to find out addresses if they'd the misfortune to have lost them."

Either the sight of the silver coin shifting in Dixon's palm, or the young man's ingenuous countenance, was too much for the constable's sense of humour. "You look like a young man from the country, you do," he said, surveying Dixon sceptically, "I *don't* think!"

"All the same, I want to know the name of these stores."

"If it ain't William Whiteley's, it's John Barker's. If it ain't John Barker's, it's 'Arrod's. If it ain't 'Arrod's, I

shouldn't be altogether surprised it if wasn't the blooming Army and Navy Stores!"

"Wouldn't you now, really," said Dixon, closing his left eye. "Now I come to think of it, no more should I." He transferred the half-crown discreetly into the constable's welcoming hand. "You ought to be a directory at the post office instead of a policeman," he grinned at the young giant in the blue helmet. "I'll be sure and come back and let you know if it's the bloomin' Army and Navy Stores." He swung himself on to a motor bus going full speed, and disappeared down the street.

The policeman checked himself in his beat to look after the departing bus. "Who's 'e, I wonder," he said to himself. "A little bit of something extra, I'll be bound."

The first thing Dixon did at the stores was to inquire for the manager's room. "I think Mr Carew, of 117 Dashley Gardens, has an account here," he said to the good-looking young man who introduced himself as the managing director's secretary.

At the name the young man's blond and handsome countenance underwent a change. "We're not by way of running accounts," he said civilly. "Ours is a purely ready-money business, as, of course, you know. In the case, however, of some well-known customer, we now and then do extend slightly prolonged credit. . . ." He stopped short and opened his eyes wide at Mortimer Dixon, as if too embarrassed to say any more.

"As is the case, I take it, with my friend, Mr Carew?"

The blond young man looked down his handsome young nose. "I regret to say that Mr Carew's account is, at the moment, under notice of the managing director. It is, of course, well known to us that Mr Carew is a gentleman of means, or we should not have ignored the thing for so long."

"How much does he owe?" said Dixon abruptly.

The young gentleman, who was not accustomed to such directness of speech, was slightly taken back. "It is not our usual habit to discuss our customers' business transactions with us, my dear sir, unless of course——" He cocked an eye, as alert as Dixon's own, at the immaculate young man wearing the unhappy debtor's clothes.

"It's quite safe with me," said Dixon abruptly. "How much?"

The managing director's secretary began to swing his

gold pince-nez by its slender gold chain in an agitated kind of way. "I will not pledge myself to the accuracy of the pence," he murmured, looking over Dixon's shoulder. "But I fancy"—he tapped his front teeth with his eyeglasses—"I fancy I am fairly correct in saying Mr Carew's account with us stands some eighty pounds odd on the wrong side."

Eighty pounds odd for cheese and bacon, for a young man who spent one-half of his life visiting rich relations in country houses, and the other half in London's most expensive restaurants!

"How long has this sum been owing?"

The managing director's secretary began to blink. "Of course I couldn't tell to a day without referring to the books, Mr——" His alert eye travelled back from the spaces over Dixon's shoulder and brought itself to bear, with the most complete directness, on Dixon's own. "Mr——" He paused artistically.

But Mortimer Dixon was not by way of being artistic that day. "I'm not particular to a week or two," he remarked affably. "But, approximately, how long? Shall we make it two months?"

"Oh, more than two months."

"Shall we make it three?"

"Let's put it at four." The mellifluous tones of the managing director's secretary appealed to Dixon in just the same way as did his well-kept teeth.

"Owing four months, and about eighty pounds." Dixon took out a notebook and entered the time and the amount. He snapped the elastic briskly. "Thanks. I'll send you a cheque to-night."

The secretary placed his gold eyeglasses on his handsome young nose. "Thanks very much. The managing director will be delighted. There's nothing he dislikes more than having to press a customer in any way. When he comes I'll tell him what you say, Mr——" He looked over his glasses and paused.

This time there was no getting out of it. "My name's Dixon."

In his turn the bland young man whipped out an elegant silver memorandum tablet and entered the name. "Cks or x?" he murmured urbanely.

"X."

"X," murmured the secretary. He put the little book

back into his pocket, and placed his elegant young person between Dixon and the door. "In mentioning this matter to the managing director, Mr—er—Dixon, shall I say that you are Mr Carew's solicitor?"

"No; I'm not his solicitor."

"His brother perhaps?"

"No, I'm not his brother."

"But a near relation, I take it?"

"His grandfather," said Mortimer Dixon solemnly.

The two young men, so alert, so well dressed, so jolly cocksure of themselves, so entirely typical of their generation and kind, burst out laughing.

"Cash O.K.?" inquired the one.

"Cash O.K." responded the other.

They shook hands, sworn brothers, and parted. Both felt, as they separated, that they could have run a big business together extremely well.

"Eighty pounds, and owing four months," Mortimer Dixon said to himself. "It's just four months he's been at that blooming flat." He jumped on to a passing bus, and went down the Strand into newspaper land.

At the door of The Sentinel Offices stood the great silver-grey car, with the aluminium fittings, which was unique of its kind in London town. At the sight of it Mortimer Dixon's heart went thump. "Just coming or just going?" he inquired of the huge commissionaire standing within the glass doors.

"Just come, sir. Directors' meeting."

"Damn," said Mortimer Dixon. He went up to the reporters' room, caught up a pen and paper, and wrote his second letter that morning. This is what he wrote:

"MY LORD,—I've found the one.

"I'm about to find the other.

"I want two orders on the counting-house, each for a hundred pounds."

He scrawled his initials on the bottom of this effusion and stuck it into an envelope. It was certainly unique; for it is doubtful whether there was another man living who would have dared to have written such a letter, to such a man, in just such a way.

"You take that envelope," he said to a young office boy

lounging about the passage outside. "Take it into the directors' room, and give it to *Him*."

"But, Mr Dixon, HE's got a directors' meeting on."

"You do as I tell you. Look slippery. I'm waiting."

"If I do this, sir, I'll get the sack."

"Don't you believe it. You'll get your wages raised."

Without another word, the youngster took the envelope and, bold as brass, made off up the stairs. In less than five minutes he was back again with a visiting-card in his hand.

"HE gave me this himself, sir." The boy's voice vibrated with admiration for the journalist who had dared to interrupt the great man.

Dixon took the card and read it, and the joyous young blood came rushing in crimson waves to his face. This is what he read:

"Pay Mortimer Dixon whatever money he wishes to draw, until further instructions from me."

It was signed with the magic initials which, if Fleet Street was right, were good for a couple of million pounds.

"I want two hundred pounds," he said to the head cashier, presenting the card. "One one-hundred-pound note, one fifty-pound note, and the rest in tens." He might have been the great man himself drawing his pocket-money for the week.

The grey-headed cashier, who had watched the magic rise of that extraordinary firm from the hour of its birth, looked over the top of his spectacles at the self-confident young man. "It's a tall order for a young man of your age, Mr Dixon," he said, passing the money over the counter.

Dixon laughed as he shovelled it into his pockets with the sublime indifference of the multi-millionaire. "That so?" he remarked, in his airy way. "You ought to be jolly glad I didn't stick you for ten times that amount."

The head cashier raised his thin, old hands shoulder-high. "Oh, you young men!" he said, lost in wonder at the way times had changed from when he was a boy, "I don't know what the world's coming to."

"I do," said Mortimer, in his joyous, arrogant way. "To *me*!" Then his sunny smile shone out, disarming the frail old man. "You'd better keep the card. If I died and he died, it might be awkward for you."

"You're not the sort who dies, either of you," said the cashier.

Dixon's boyish, young laughter rang through the room. "You never know your luck."

"I know yours," the old man said to himself, as the doors swung to behind that gallant young figure. "You're one of the ones whose luck lies at the top." He shook his grey head as he returned to his figures. "I wish to God HE had a splendid young son like you."

Meantime Dixon hailed a taxi and drove to his rooms.

On the steps of the door stood the hall porter. "My aunt in?" he asked, as the man came forward.

"Yes, sir." The hall porter twinkled all over. "Your cousin's also in, sir."

But Dixon, free and easy as he was, knew where to draw the line. "The Spaniards say that the man who answers more than he's asked had better sew up his mouth," he said casually. The Spaniards had never said anything of the kind as far as he knew, but it was a habit of his, whenever he turned out a little proverb of his own, to father it on to Spain.

He nipped out of the cab and, before the man had recovered from his rebuff sufficiently to get the lift door open, had darted up the stairs.

CHAPTER XXV

IN Dixon's rooms, as cosily ensconced as if they had been there for years, were the widow and her daughter and the cat. A delicate tea was spread on the table, and the younger woman was eating her cake and strawberry jam with the happy relish of youth. Her mother, with her daughter's hand in hers, seemed contented to feast on that beautiful face.

"Don't you worry about me," said Dixon briskly. "I don't want any tea, thank you. If you don't mind, I want to telephone." Had he sat himself down at the table and shaken hands, and made various inquiries as to their sleep and general health, both mother and daughter would have been perturbed and ill at ease. Treating their presence as a matter of course, and flying off, with a mere glance at them, to his own affairs, made them feel, as he had intended

they should, as if *he* were the intruder, and they in their own home.

"You've got to stick it out here, both of you," he informed them, as he waited for the connection. "Get your lists ready by ten o'clock in the morning, and the man who came to you to-day will get you all you want. Don't talk to the hall porter. He's a good sort, but he talks too much."

He stopped short as a little voice over the telephone asked if it were he.

"Get my letter?" he inquired eagerly. "Sent me an answer? Good. I'm O.K. Buy a penny notebook. I want you to keep an account of what I spend. Stick down five pounds for a taxi, and eighty pounds for a bill. Thanks. That's all. Good-bye."

Women are naturally acute, but neither of the two who overheard that business-like little transaction had any idea that their hero was talking to the woman in whose little hands he had placed his life. He jumped up and came back to them. "Got all you want?"

"You've thought of everything," said the widow fervently. Her faded eyes devoured the young man's handsome countenance with a passion of gratitude she made no effort to conceal.

"And how's the foot?" It was the first time he had pointedly addressed the young girl. As he did so, he looked at her. In the bright sunlight she was, if possible, more beautiful than he had taken her to be in the night.

But it is one thing to find yourself in a situation teeming with romance, with your nerves all agog, racing for your life with an exquisite, helpless piece of humanity in your arms, and quite a different pair of shoes to stand in a commonplace little room watching that same young goddess partaking of strawberry jam and tea. Beautiful she was, undoubtedly. But that searching eye of Dixon's discovered a dozen flaws in this seeming perfection he had ignored the night before. The chin was a little too pointed; the eyes, brilliant in colouring and sparkle, were a trifle hard; the lips, scarlet and mutinous, were a suspicion too full. It was inconceivable to Dixon that, only a few hours before, this same face had nearly been the means of turning him into a traitor to the girl he loved. He admired her as much as ever, but it was the gallant, dispassionate homage one pays

to a beautiful picture, or a charming statue, or the delightful representative of a character in a play.

Was he glad he had not listened to the voice of the tempter! Was he thankful he had silenced the growling beast within him, and sent it slinking back, ashamed and silent, to its chains! Did his whole soul rise within him, and float on happy, outstretched pinions to that little home in Brixton where the little girl sat, who was neither beautiful nor romantic, but just the little girl he loved!

You bet your boots he was.

"How's the foot?" he asked kindly, looking the girl straight in the eyes.

"Beastly," responded the young lady, who had also come to her senses, and was comparing Dixon, to his disadvantage, with the rotter who was the darling of her soul.

"I'm sorry. Try Zambuk. There's some in my wash-stand drawer. See you to-morrow. So long."

With these impassioned words did these two young people, whose hearts had beat so wildly for each other in their race with death, shake hands and part over a pot of Beach's strawberry jam.

Into the taxi and back to the stores went Dixon. "I've come to pay Mr Carew's bill."

"Eighty pounds, thirteen shillings and elevenpence, sir."

He plumped down his hundred-pound note, gathered up his change and went back to the flat.

Lurking round the corner, as agreed upon, was the chauffeur with his cab. "Got a letter for me?" Dixon demanded.

The man handed him a little blue envelope with the well-known handwriting outside.

"How did she look? What did she wear? What did she say? Did you speak to her yourself?" The questions came pouring out like fire from a volcano.

The man's answers were very reassuring. It seemed that the Plump Little Party looked as pretty as a pink; had worn a white cotton dress, had said that she was perfectly well, and had given the letter to the chauffeur herself.

"Did she ask you anything about me?" demanded Dixon.

"First go-off, sir."

"What did you say?"

"That you looked a trifle off colour, sir."

"Idiot!" stormed Dixon furiously. "What on earth made you say that?"

The chauffeur grinned all over his good-looking face. "Bless yer heart, sir," he said heartily, "I know women! They're never happy unless they're worrying. I always make a point of giving my young lady something to worry about."

"You and your young lady go to the devil," said Mortimer Dixon, laughing in spite of himself. He shoved his hand into his pocket and took out a handful of change. "Here's your half-sovereign that you lent me. Go and have a good tuck in, and mind you bring some sandwiches, and a bottle of beer to keep under your seat, for I want you to hang about again here, perhaps half the night."

"Right you are, sir."

The cab moved off, and Dixon, his heart beating high, opened the little blue envelope.

Its contents were as adorably simple as the little woman who wrote. "Darling, of course I understand."

That was all she said, but it was more than enough for Mortimer Dixon. Those five little words were enough to glorify his whole world for the rest of that day.

"*I understand.*"

And the surprising part of it was, that she *did* understand; and what is more—sweet soul—if he had kissed the girl and eloped with the pearls, she would have understood and loved her Morty just the same.

He took the tender little message, so full of womanly comprehension, so magical in its message of sympathy and love, and slipped it inside his waistcoat against his heart. That was his talisman.

Happy as a king he went back to the mysterious flat.

The rest of that day he passed in the utmost luxury. He was overtired, he knew it; so he made up his mind to take a complete rest. He brought one of the lounges out into the balcony, and under the gay-striped awning, embowered by the pink roses, he lay at his full length, with a nice cool lemon squash to sip at intervals, and one of Carew's most excellent cigarettes in his mouth.

At half-past seven he roused himself sufficiently to go into the dining-room and partake of a most excellently cooked meal. Then he toddled to bed and was fast asleep by half-past eight.

To his surprise, when he woke, though he had slept the round of the clock, he felt even more tired than he had felt the day before. He got up and dressed languidly. Even his cold bath did not restore him to anything like his usual self. Furthermore, his usual amazing appetite for his breakfast had deserted him! Likewise his head felt queer. So disinclined was he for any exercise, that he lay out on the balcony doing nothing with a great deal of satisfaction to himself for the whole of the day.

Towards evening, he began to feel better again.

Again, a most excellent repast was awaiting him, and he partook of it with the greatest satisfaction to himself.

While he was eating his soup, he made up his mind that he would run into town and pass an hour in a music hall. When he got to the fish, he thought he would send the chauffeur down for his bicycle and take a spin out to Richmond Park. By the time he was half through his entrée, he had decided to telephone to the Plump Little Party that he would fetch her in a taxi, and they would go for a mad ride by moonlight to Brighton and back that night.

There seemed something a little out of the way about this last suggestion, but he dismissed that with a wave of the hand. The more he thought of it, the better he liked the notion. After all, he had plenty of money by him—it did not occur to him that it was not his own—therefore, why not take a private touring car? The thought of the wild rushing through the night air with the clouds chasing the moon, and the dear little soul he loved huddled up soft and warm in his protecting arms, was so alluring that Dixon's heart began to bang about in the most extraordinary way.

He told himself they would exceed the speed limit. That would be the best part of the fun! They would chase those jolly old Sussex downs until they were flying as fast as the clouds. They would go round at a tear by the Devil's Dyke—perhaps they would see the devil! Why not! Lots of people had seen the devil! He felt that he would rather like to have an interview with that spectacular personage. Cloven hoof, scarlet plumes and fiery tail! Why should he not go for a ride with them in the motor? A jolly good chap, the devil!

“A Midnight Motor-Ride with the Devil!” What a story it would make!

The three of them would go down to Brighton in the motor.

They would put up at the Metropole and have a jolly good supper, green peas and lobster salad—there seemed to come a queer hiatus in Dixon's brain—and—what the devil was the name of that particular brand of champagne! Anyway champagne. Rivers of it! Seas of it! Oceans of it! . . .

He came back to himself to find his head spinning round, his heart beating, and his throat so parched he could hardly speak. The charwoman at his side was handing him a charmingly arranged little dish of strawberry ice.

"Ice," said Dixon to himself. He put out his hand. It shook so that he could hardly hold the spoon. "Ice," he repeated aloud, and helped himself greedily. At the sound of his own voice he started. Instinctively, after the manner of man, he looked in the glass. "I'm drunk," he said to himself. "That's what I am—*drunk*." He put out a shaking hand and felt his wineglass. It was dry.

"Which will you take, sir, claret or beer?"

As it happened, he oftener than not drank water. It was on the point of his tongue to say "Thanks, neither," when some instinct, louder than reason, told him to choose champagne. "If Mr Carew's got any," he forced himself to say, "I think I'll take champagne."

The woman left the room noiselessly.

Dixon put his elbows on the table and pushed away his plate untasted, and leant his head on his knees. "I'm not drunk," he said to himself, "for I haven't drunk anything. What's the matter with me! I can't fix my mind. Am I ill! Am I mad! What the devil's wrong with me?" His brain felt as if it were on fire. His tongue felt as if it were made of wood. His throat felt as if it were made of ice. The furious elation of a few moments before had entirely left him. His heart was banging, his breath came in short, hard gasps; he felt as if he were being suffocated to death.

The charwoman came back with the champagne.

As in a dream, he heard the pop of the cork, and with a glazing eye he saw, as through a mist, the wine frothing and creaming into the glass. From far, far away, the woman's voice came to him full of solicitude: "Ain't you feeling well, sir?"

Dixon managed to shake his head.

"Anything I can get you, sir?"

"A doctor," gasped Dixon. "I think I'm dying."

“ Oh no, you ain't, sir. It's the 'eat, I expect. Take a drop of this.”

Dixon felt her fingers closing round his as she guided the glass into his hand. He was just about to take a sip when he looked up and saw the charwoman's face bending over him in the glass. It was the face of a devil. As though a voice from heaven had spoken, Dixon told himself that she had poisoned the wine. Rallying all his strength he shook her hand away so violently that the glass went smash.

“ You go and fetch a doctor. Do you hear? And go quick at that.”

Even at that terrible moment he noticed the panic in the woman's eyes.

He dragged himself to his feet and shuffled to the door.

The charwoman made as if to go down the corridor towards the kitchen. He blocked her way, still holding on to the door. “ That's not the way out,” he said thickly.

“ I'm only going to get my bonnet, sir.”

“ Bonnet be damned,” he answered her. “ That's the way out.”

“ Won't you let me telephone, sir? I don't like to leave you alone.”

“ You do as I tell you,” said Dixon.

With his last remaining strength he tore the door open, and, flinging his arm round her shoulders, he thrust her out and banged the door after her.

The violent physical effort, though it exhausted him, yet proved his salvation. It brought on a sensation of such deadly sickness that if it had not been for the iron self-control which he exercised, he would have lost consciousness then and there.

The sickness brought with it the thought of the emetic. “ She's poisoned me, the old cat! but I'm *not* going to die!” He lurched back into the dining-room, seized the mustard-pot, and diluting the hot water boiling in the little silver kettle, ready for his coffee, to a mawkish lukewarm, he mixed the tumbler full of mustard and water and drank it down.

The result was instantaneous. He had barely time to get himself into his bedroom before he was violently sick.

Between the paroxysms of retching, he stumbled to the telephone, and told the porter to come up.

The man's face, when Dixon opened the door to him, went almost as white as Dixon's own.

" Good God, sir," he gasped, " what's the matter ? "

The instinct of his journalistic training stood Dixon in good stead. " I'm horribly ill. I'm poisoned. I've been sick, but I'm getting better. Know a doctor ? "

" Dr Brownlow, in the first-floor flat, sir."

" In ? "

" Yes, sir ; his car's at the door. The chauffeur told me his master was dining out. Shall I fetch him, sir ? "

" As quick as you can."

The man could not have been gone two minutes, but in that time Dixon was violently sick again. The last paroxysm had been worst of all. The hall porter returned with the doctor and found him lying in an almost comatose condition, on the bathroom floor.

" Got any brandy in the place ? " Dixon heard the doctor say.

The hall porter rushed away and returned with the Tantalus bottle in his hand.

" Not that," said Dixon faintly. " Get some of your own."

" There's plenty in my flat," said the doctor to the hall porter. " Go and tell them to give you a bottle, quick."

" What does this mean ? " the doctor said to Dixon, when the two of them were left alone.

A shadow of Dixon's cheerful grin trembled around his white lips. " Poison, I guess."

" You mean you've taken poison ? "

Dixon rolled his head feebly to and fro against the doctor's arm. " I'm not such a juggins as that."

" Then something's poisoned you ? "

" Ptomaine ? "

" From the symptoms, I should diagnose opium."

" *Opium* ? "

Dixon wrenched himself out of the doctor's arms. " Gollypots, I *am* a juggins ! " he said feebly, and was immediately sick again.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE next half-hour of Dixon's life was a confusion of brandy and water, and sickness and carbolic ; the doctor's face bending over him on the one side, and the hall porter's on

the other, as he lay between them in the bed, where they had lifted him for greater ease. Then came a sensation of delicious repose, in which he felt as though he were flying away. Then came a sensation of dropping through spaces eternal. Then Dixon opened his eyes.

"You're all right, old man. You'll pull through."

"You bet, I'll pull through," said Dixon; then he turned to the hall porter: "There's a man with a taxicab—number's thirteen—he's standing just round the corner," he moved his head feebly, and his voice drifted away into silence.

"This may be important," he heard the doctor saying. "We must rouse him again."

Something strong and pungent was held to Dixon's lips, and, as he drank, he felt a spasm of strength returning again.

"There's a man with a taxicab whose number is thirteen. He's waiting round the corner for you," said the doctor's voice urgently beside him. "Try and tell us what you want him to do."

"I want him to come here."

"You mean you want the man to come up and speak to you?"

"Yes." Dixon shut his eyes, and his mind began wandering again.

Then came a long silence.

Silence full of whirling sounds and moonlit waves that leapt in glittering cascades up to the stars. Then came long ridges of green hills which danced in the moonlight. Then came a rush of wheels and a mad journey through the air, and, oddly enough, an adventurous setting forth in a motor car breasting the deep waters of a fathomless sea. Then a return to consciousness and familiar eyes looking into his, and a cheery voice subdued out of all recognition asking him what it was he wanted him to do.

It was the taxicab driver of Number Thirteen.

The sight of him brought Dixon back to life. "I want you to stay with me." He put out a feeble hand and signed to the man to bend lower. "I've put my head into the lion's mouth and it has pretty well chewed it off. They've poisoned me with opium."

The man's intelligent eyes lighted up at the word opium, even as Dixon's own had done. "I understand, sir."

"Don't you leave me. Don't you eat anything they

give you. Don't let them give anything to me." His head fell back on his pillows again.

"Pretty lucid, considering his condition," the doctor said to the chauffeur. "Do you know who the gentleman is?"

"He's one of the best and cleverest men in London, sir," the man answered him civilly. "That's about all I know."

"Do you know if he lives here?"

Some unreasoning instinct made the man realise that Dixon's whole desire was for secrecy. "I don't think so, sir. I think this gentleman is up from the country and has hired this place from a friend."

"But he said you were waiting for him?"

Again the excellent fellow was ready with his answer. "I expect he thought I'd be getting anxious, sir. The gentleman engaged me by the hour."

"He said distinctly he wished you to stay with him. Can you manage to do so? If not, I'll send for a nurse."

"I'll stay with him right enough, sir. I've been through the Boer War with the Red Cross Ambulance, and I know a good bit about sick nursing myself. He's pretty bad, isn't he, sir?"

"Not so bad as he was. He'll pull through all right now. If he hadn't been in such excellent condition, he'd have been in Kingdom Come by now. I suppose there's plenty of money knocking about, judging by the look of this place."

"I think so, sir."

"Then perhaps you'd better have a nurse."

"Just as you like, sir; but if you'll tell me what to do, I'll undertake to manage all right."

"There's really nothing to do," the doctor answered him. "He'll wake and sleep, sleep and wake, all through the night. When he wakes give him a drop of brandy; if he feels sick give him a spoonful of this." He held up the mixture that the hall porter had fetched from the chemist.

"Very good, sir."

"If he shows any signs of collapse, ring me up at 1397 Victoria. I'm dining out, but it's only a few doors from here. I'll come, if you want me, at once."

"Thank you very much, sir."

The doctor bent over Dixon and with a gentle finger lifted one of his eyelids and looked closely into his eyes. "That's opium right enough," he said, taking his white gloves out of

his pocket, and beginning to put them on. "Yet he doesn't look like a man who drugs."

"I think the gentleman's a writer, sir," interposed the chauffeur respectfully.

"Ah, well," said the doctor, "I've no doubt he'll be able to tell us all about himself to-morrow. In any case, I shall give him a look in about eleven when I return. You've got my number?"

"1397 Victoria, sir."

"Right. I'll ring up about nine." The physician was just turning away when the chauffeur intervened between him and the door.

"Beg your pardon, sir, but about my taxi."

"What about it?"

"There's a place on that rank where we get our meals, sir. If you'll let your man tell them there to keep an eye on it, I'd be glad, sir."

"Certainly, I will."

The hall porter, who had been a silent listener to the conversation, opened the door. "By the way," the doctor turned as he was leaving the flat, "aren't there any women servants in the place?"

"There's Mr Carew's charwoman, sir," the hall porter answered respectfully.

"Where is she?"

"I suppose she is out, sir."

The doctor looked over his shoulder at the taxicab driver. "You're not afraid to be left alone?"

The man smiled. "Not I, sir. I'll see that Mr Dixon's all right." The name slipped out unawares, but the doctor's sharp ears caught it.

"Dixon! I thought you said you didn't know the gentleman's name?"

"It just came back to me unbeknownst like, sir. The gentleman told me it when he engaged my cab."

Undoubtedly, whatever else Mortimer Dixon was or was not, he was a good judge of men. This man, who knew nothing about him, except that he was engaged in some terribly complicated affair which the driver's shrewdness led him to suppose was not unconnected with the police, could not have answered the questions put to him better for Dixon's purpose, if he had read them out of a book written by Dixon himself.

"Queer affair, don't you think?" the doctor said to the hall porter as they went down in the lift.

"It seems so to me, sir. But there's no flies on the poor gentleman. *He's* all right." He proceeded to relate his first interview with Dixon, and ended by showing the doctor the telegram he had had from Carew.

"It *seems* all right," the physician said, handing it back to him, "but it looks to me as if there was something a bit fishy about the affair. A flat like that with no servants, and a splendid young fellow like that dying alone of opium poison, and that taxicab fellow—for a perfect stranger, it struck me his answers were pretty glib. However, I'll come in on my way home, and if there's anything wanted, I'll ring you up."

"Very good, sir."

On that they parted, and the doctor went off in his car.

Meantime the taxicab driver stayed by Dixon's side.

It struck him also that the situation was a bit "fishy." But any doubt as to Dixon's integrity never entered his head. "'E's a detective, that's what he is," he said to himself, turning the affair over in his mind, "and whoever it is 'e's after is getting a bit desperate, and wants him out of the way." A great idea struck him suddenly. "There's that girl that all the papers are talking about. I wonder if the young lady who scrambled into my cab last night was *her*."

So lost was he in his meditations that he failed to hear the latchkey grating in the front door. The first intimation he had of the charwoman returning was when she opened the bedroom door.

"Hullo," he said, in a genial whisper, nodding affably to her.

But the sight of him in his spotless livery seemed to paralyse the woman out of the power of speech. The chauffeur, taking her surprise as the most natural consequence of her finding him installed and Dixon in bed, tip-toed across the room. "It's a pity you didn't come back half-an-hour sooner," he said.

"Who are you?"

Still setting down her abruptness to the same cause, the man civilly told her in a few words what had occurred.

"Then there's no need for you to stay any longer," she said. "I'll look after the gentleman myself."

"You can look after him, if you want to," said the man, a little put out by the way she spoke, "provided I stay here too."

"You're not going to do anything of the kind," she said angrily. "There's a doctor in the 'ouse. Do you suppose I'm not able to look after a sick man."

"From the look of you, I should say you were able to look after anything," replied the man, with the usual conversational repartee of his class. "But, as it so 'appens, he told me to stay here, and stay here I do until he tells me to go."

The charwoman looked at him as if she could have killed him. "I won't 'ave it," she said passionately. "First 'e comes"—she pointed to the sleeping Dixon—"from God knows where, and says he's to stay for a month. I work and slave for 'im all the day, and I cook him a dinner fit for a king and leave him here well, a-eating of it, and soon's my back's turned then there's another upset, and I come back to find 'im lying in bed and the doctor been, and you 'ere."

"So *you* cooked his dinner, did yer ? "

"And if I did, wot's that to do with you ? "

"It's got a precious lot to do with 'im, judging by the looks of him."

The woman went white to the lips. "What do you mean by that ? " She inquired furiously.

"You said he was quite well when 'e sat down to his dinner, and ten minutes after he was nearly at 'is last breath. Is yer pastry as bad as all that ? "

"You leave me and my pastry alone," she said, shaking with passion.

"And you leave me alone, or there'll be trouble."

"There ain't no need to shout, I ain't deaf. Stay till Doomsday, the pair of you, for all *I* care." She bounced out of the room. The chauffeur watched her plunge through the baize door, then he went back to Dixon's side.

For the next two hours he sat listening to the deep breathing of the man in the bed.

At about a quarter to ten, the telephone bell rang. The chauffeur took a last good look at the unconscious sleeper, went out into the corridor, shut the door and locked it, located the room where the bell rang, knocked at the door and opened it.

It was the doctor asking for news of the patient's condition. The chauffeur told him as best he could.

"Stertorous breathing and face still red?"

"Not so red as before, sir."

"Good; if he wakes give him a good stiff drink of brandy and water with a teaspoonful of the powder mixed with it. I'll look in about half-past eleven when I come home. If there's any change, ring me up. Got my number?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right."

The chauffeur hung up the receiver and crept noiselessly down the corridor. Outside Mortimer Dixon's room was the charwoman with her eye to the keyhole. The man laid his hand on her shoulder and she jumped as if she were shot.

"And wot are you a'-doin' of, pray, walking in and out of the rooms as if you was master of the 'ouse?" she demanded, scrambling to her feet with an agility surprising in a woman of her size.

"And what are *you* doing of, pray, with your eye to the keyhole?" the man answered, with scathing sarcasm.

"Looking to see why the key ain't in the keyhole. Where is it?"

"Here." The chauffeur took it out of his pocket and gaily dangled it in front of her eyes.

The woman fairly exploded with fury. "D'yer mean to tell me you've 'ad the impidence to lock that door?"

"I do," he answered. He inserted the key in the keyhole and turned the lock.

"Why did you lock that door? I want to go in."

"That's why I locked it, my dear, to keep you out." As he spoke he took the key out, and went into the room, shut the door in her face and locked it.

A man after Dixon's own heart, that chauffeur. Making allowance for the differences of class and education, the two men were built on identical lines.

At the end of about half-an-hour Mortimer Dixon roused and took his brandy and medicine as prescribed. "Don't you leave me," he said, making an effort, painful to witness, to collect his wits.

"I sha'n't leave you, sir."

"Good chap." Mortimer took a last gulp at the glass, turned over and fell once more into perturbed sleep.

At half-past eleven the doctor arrived.

"He's out of the wood," he said, after a minute examination of the sleeping man. "It's a good thing for him he's in the pink of condition or he wouldn't be here now."

"Was it as close as that, sir?"

The doctor nodded. Then, like the charwoman before him, he inquired why the door was locked.

"To keep that old cat of a charwoman out, sir. She worries me out of my life."

"She seems to be a bit of a nuisance," the doctor replied briefly. He omitted to add that he had already been entertained with an extraordinary account of Mortimer Dixon and the occurrences consequent on his taking up his residence in the flat. "Are you going to stay here the night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not afraid of the responsibility, eh?" The physician darted a quick look at the quiet, well-spoken man.

"No, sir."

"Good. Give him his medicine every three hours, and I'll come up first thing in the morning. He ought to be in a condition to tell us something by that time."

"Very good, sir."

At the door the doctor paused. Underneath that cold exterior beat a very kind heart, and he was, indeed, renowned for his thoughtful care of people in subordinate positions. His nurses at the hospital simply adored him. "Won't you want anything to eat in the night? Shall I tell that old woman to send you something in?"

The chauffeur grinned. "Not unless you want me as a patient too, sir."

The doctor entirely misunderstood him. "Is her cooking as bad as that?" he said pleasantly. "Good Lord! when will this old grandmother of a L.C.C. learn not to teach the boys and girls to speak Latin and play the piano, but to make their clothes and cook?"

He went away shaking his head over the delinquencies of his Majesty's Servants, and the chauffeur, locking the door after him, returned to his post by the bed.

CHAPTER XXVII

So, during the long night, this man sat and guarded the sleeping of this stranger whom he had never set eyes on forty-eight hours before.

Speaking of it afterwards, he always confessed he could not himself understand the potency of the magic which Mortimer Dixon had exercised over his heart. "I felt as I sat beside him as if I'd have died to save his life, not because I thought that it'd be a good thing for me if he got well and found out I'd seen him through, but because I couldn't help myself. When I saw him lying there helpless, and thought of him laughing so gay and caring for nothing and nobody, and anybody had come and told me that the taxicab had been run off with and me ruined, I give you my word, I shouldn't have stirred."

Stir, he certainly did not. All through that long night he never even closed his eyes. Bolt upright as a ramrod, he sat by the bed and, on the striking of the clock, administered the medicine as ordered. Each time he had the satisfaction of seeing a change in the patient's condition, and when he roused Dixon at six o'clock from a comparatively peaceful slumber he saw at a glance that he was much more like himself.

"What a beast of a taste!" Dixon said ruefully, as he swallowed the potion down. "What on earth does it smell of?"

The chauffeur sniffed at the glass carefully. "I don't know, sir. Something strong."

"Nutmegs and cloves?" Dixon said feebly.

The chauffeur shook his head. "Nothing like that, sir."

"I smell spice and cloves."

Again the chauffeur sniffed at the glass. "Not in the medicine, sir."

"Smell my hand."

The honest face, bending over the sick man, clouded—he thought his patient was light-headed again.

But though Dixon was a very sick man, he was still Mortimer Dixon, and he gauged that look at its true worth with a glance. "I'm not off my chump, old chap," he said, "and don't you think it. Just you smell my hand."

Reassured, the chauffeur bent over him and lifted the hand from where it lay on the pink silk counterpane. It was an exquisitely kept hand : the nails polished, and the texture of the skin fine. The shape of the hand, and the strong, long fingers told a tale which a palmist would have read with joy.

"It don't smell to me of anything but soap, sir."

"Hold it up against *my* nose."

Wondering at the freaks and fads of a sick man's fancy, the chauffeur did so. Mortimer Dixon sniffed at his own hand outside and palm ; then he feebly shook his head. "No, it isn't *my* hand. Lift me up, there's a good chap."

The man lifted him in his strong arms as tenderly as though he had been a trained nurse. "You don't feel sick again, do you, sir ?" he inquired anxiously.

"Sick ? I feel empty. I could eat a house." He sat propped up by his pillows, and his sunny smile, a ghost of itself, shone out at the excellent fellow standing by his bed. "You're a good chap," he said feebly. "I knew the minute I set eyes on you you were the right sort. Sure you don't smell spices ?"

"Sure, sir."

"I do." He turned his head from side to side, sniffing delicately, his fine nostrils dilating in the same way as did his eyes. "Cloves and nutmegs and incense, *strong*." He sniffed again. "I've washed my head three times. Surely it can't be my head. Just smell my head, will you ?"

As if humouring a sick child, the chauffeur bent his face close down to the close-cropped head. "That smells of soap too, sir."

But Dixon had exhausted his little strength for the time being. "I must have got it impregnated into my system in that infernal coffin," he muttered feebly. He slipped down into the bed, and in another minute was asleep again.

But this time his sleep was quite different. The rapid breathing had diminished, the horrible, stertorous sound had entirely disappeared. His mouth was closed instead of open. His face did not twitch, and his hands remained cool. It did not need the doctor to tell the chauffeur that the patient was better : the honest fellow knew it before he let him in.

"Far better than I expected," was the physician's diagnosis as he took the pulse of the sleeping man.

“ He must have a constitution of iron. I should say he’s never had a day’s illness in his life before.”

“ Oh yes, I have.” Dixon opened his blue eyes unexpectedly. “ I nearly shook hands with Father Death two years ago.”

“ What was the matter with you then ? ” asked the doctor, interested in his patient.

The blue eyes began to twinkle with something of their old sparkle. “ I’d been up in a God-forsaken aeroplane looking for the man in the moon, and I caught a chill.”

“ You seem to make a habit of going in for extraordinary adventures,” the physician answered him. “ What were you doing last night to get yourself into such a condition as this ? ”

Mortimer Dixon did not hesitate a moment. “ I’m a journalist, and I wanted to see for myself if De Quincey’s descriptions of opium were correct.”

The physician stared down at the ingenuous young countenance, white as the pillows against which it lay. “ You young madman ! ” he cried. “ Do you know that you were within an ace of losing your life ? This good fellow of yours”—he nodded his head to the chauffeur standing by—“ thought your charwoman had poisoned you.”

Dixon went into a feeble spasm of laughter. “ What ! that dear old char of mine ? Why, she wouldn’t hurt a fly. She’s been with my friend Carew for years. Just call her in, will you ? ” He nodded to the taxicab driver.

With considerable reluctance, the chauffeur disappeared. He found the charwoman in the kitchen with her apron over her head, and her face buried in her arms, rocking herself to and fro. “ ’Ere ! you get up and come along o’ me to the doctor. He wants to speak to you.”

She sprang to her feet. “ Well I ain’t a-comin’. Wot’s he want with me ? ”

“ You’ll find that out when he sees you. If Mr Dixon ’ad died, you’d have been hung ! ”

She shivered, and her face went deadly white, but she did not answer a word.

“ The Lord alone knows what’s going to happen to him. It isn’t any good your sitting ’ere saying you won’t come, you’ve got to.” He made a threatening step towards her ;

the woman fell back before him, and followed him down the passage like a beaten dog.

"Come in," said Mortimer Dixon, as she appeared in the doorway. "You poor old dear! No wonder you look so white and anxious! I've only just this minute heard that you've been locked out of my room!"

The woman stared at him as if she could not believe her ears.

"This good fellow thought that you wanted to injure me," Dixon said pleasantly, his eye holding hers with a meaning glance, "but, as I've just told the doctor, you're the best cook in England, and have been in my friend's employment for years."

The woman stood still, twisting her hands convulsively. Her eyes reminded Dixon of an animal making its last stand when brought to bay. "There's no need for you to look so frightened," he said to her. "Don't you worry about me, I'm all right." He turned to the doctor. "When I'm better I must get you to come up and dine with me. Then you'll see what kind of a dinner she can cook! Why, last night I had bisque *décrevisses*, and a filleted sole *à la Colbert*, and a mushroom entrée enough to make your mouth water."

"Ah, *mushrooms!*" exclaimed the doctor. "Were they fresh or tinned?" He turned to the charwoman, but Dixon interposed; he saw that she was literally unable to speak.

"Tinned, my dear doctor? You don't suppose we've tinned things up here, do you? Why, that dear old woman over there would fall down in a fit if you offered her tinned things to cook."

"Come, come," said the doctor, "you're talking a bit too much. It's true you're much better, but you must take care of yourself. You won't be able to get up for another two days."

Dixon flashed a glance over the doctor's shoulder at the charwoman. Her eyes were full of hopeless despair.

"My dear man, I feel as fit as a fiddle. I shall want to get up this afternoon."

"We'll see about that," said the doctor quietly. "I'll come up again after lunch; till then, you stay where you are." He rose as he spoke, and held out his hand. "I'm glad to see you so much better."

“ I don’t know how to thank you,” said Dixon, with equal cordiality. “ I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve such kindness from you three good people.” Again his eyes darted to the charwoman’s face of stupefaction. “ I’m certainly the luckiest fellow in the world.”

“ Well, if you call it lucky to bring yourself down to death’s door with your mad experiments ! ” the physician answered, laughing, “ I wish all my patients had such a keen sense of gratitude and such a glorious set of nerves.” He turned to the charwoman on his way to the door. “ And I’m glad, indeed, my good woman, that Mr Dixon has explained things so satisfactorily, otherwise it might have been a bad lookout for you.”

The woman blanched, and bent forward in a kind of awkward mixture of bow and courtesy, and the doctor left the room.

“ Go and open the door for the doctor, there’s a good chap,” Dixon said to the taxicab driver ; “ and run out and get yourself a jolly good breakfast. You needn’t be afraid. I’m all right.”

“ Are you sure, sir ? ”

“ As right as rain.” He turned to the charwoman. “ You’ll look after me, won’t you ? ”

The woman started. “ Yes, sir.”

“ Very good, sir ; then I’ll go.” The chauffeur closed the door behind him and the doctor, and Dixon and the charwoman were alone.

For quite a long time the two of them, the injured and the injurer, looked at each other—then Dixon held out his hand. “ So you wanted to poison me, did you ? ”

The woman flung herself down on her knees beside the bed. “ Before Gawd, sir, I didn’t ! ” she said. “ I swear to you before Almighty Gawd, sir, I didn’t know it’d do you any harm.”

“ You silly fool ! ” said Dixon, kindly patting her shoulder, “ You poor, silly, silly fool ! ”

The woman seized his hand in hers. “ Before Almighty Gawd, sir, I didn’t know what I was a-doing of. I’d seen *’im* take it so often, much, much more than I give you.”

“ Your husband, you mean ? ”

The charwoman nodded. “ ‘E ’ad it all day, sir, and ’arf the night as well. I’ve known *’im* take as much as that, sir.” She made a movement as if measuring something in her

hands. "I only gave you so much, just a pinch as you might say. May Gawd strike me dead if I meant it to do you any harm, sir." She buried her face in the counterpane and sobbed.

"Well, you didn't give it to me to do me any good, did you?"

Still keeping her face buried, the woman shook her head.

"What *did* you give it to me for? Come now, look up and tell me the truth."

"I can't, sir." She lifted her face and looked at him with her tear-stained, despairing eyes.

"Can't tell me why you gave me opium?"

"No, sir."

An inspiration came to him. "I suppose you wanted to get me to sleep in order to get me out of the way?"

The woman literally gasped for breath. "'Ow did you know that?"

"I guessed."

"Guessed!"

Dixon smiled at her. "You silly fool, there's very little I don't guess."

"When you was alyin' there, sir, I still thought nothink of it. I'd seen 'im like it so often before. 'E'd lie and groan and roll 'is eyes about, same as you, and after he'd 'ad a sleep 'e'd be as right as right. Why, I left you lying there, sir, just as you was and went out without a thought."

"You might have found me dead."

"I know, sir."

"In that case you might have been hanged yourself."

The woman shuddered. "I know, sir."

"You're a silly fool," said Mortimer Dixon; "but I like silly fools. I'm one myself. Come, let's be friends." He held out his hand, but the woman did not take it.

She rose to her feet and stood looking down at the man who, with a word, could have sent her to gaol. "I can't take your 'and, sir," she said quietly. "I wish to Gawd I could. I've 'ated you and feared you, but, before Gawd, I never meant to 'arm you."

"Then why not take my hand?"

"I can't, sir. You've saved me, and others beside me, more than you'll ever know. A word from you, I'd 'ave been locked up, and goodness knows what I'd 'ave done then. I'll never forget it, sir—never, as long as I live. But I can't

take your 'and, 'cause I daren't. P'r'aps some day, sir, if you'll offer it to me again, sir, I'll be able to, but not *now*."

"Then we'll wait till some day," said Dixon cheerily. "Now you go along into the kitchen, and dry your eyes, and wash your face, and make your hair tidy—you've got uncommonly nice hair, you know—and make me some nice crisp toast and a cup of tea."

The woman stared at him as if she'd taken leave of her senses. "You mean you'll trust me again?" she faltered.

"Why, of course I trust you."

"My Gawd!" The woman seized his hand and kissed it in a kind of frenzy, the tears rolling down her fat, red face.

"There, there," said Dixon, patting her on the shoulder. "I told you you were an old silly! Go and get my tea."

When the chauffeur returned to his duties, he found his patient sitting up in bed with a lace cloth over the pink silk counterpane, and a most appetising little tray in front of him, partaking with great gusto of toast and tea.

All the rest of that day Dixon slept and ate, and ate and slept. In the evening he told the doctor, who came up again, that he wanted to get up and telephone.

"You must let somebody else do your telephoning," the doctor told him. "This has pulled you down more than you dream of. For the next two or three days, my young friend, you must stay in bed."

"If you're going to talk like that," Dixon declared, "I sha'n't have you as a doctor."

"I don't know that you ought to have me, as it is," the physician replied, laughing in his turn. "It's against all medical etiquette that I'm here, you know."

"How's that?" Dixon inquired.

"The hall porter tells me that another physician attended Mr Carew."

"Rats! Why, Carew's never been ill in his life."

"There you're mistaken. Mr Carew had a doctor to see him twice or three times a day the whole of last week."

"It's the first *I've* heard of it," Dixon declared. "I supped with him the night before last, just before he left for Berlin, and he never said a word to me about being ill."

"Indeed?" said the doctor politely.

His tone was courtesy itself, but there was something that Mortimer did not altogether like behind those courteous tones. Then the thought went out of his head and he sat

up in his bed. "Do you smell anything peculiar in this flat?" he asked.

"Not a thing."

"Nothing curious, like an Eastern perfume? Nothing like cloves and nutmegs and spices?"

"My dear sir, you've been taking opium again."

"Smell my hand, there's a good fellow; will you?"

With the same wonder in his eyes as there was in the chauffeur's before him, the doctor stooped and laid his face against Dixon's hand.

"A most healthy smell of soap and water; nothing more. It's your fancy."

"I suppose it is," Dixon answered idly. But when the doctor had gone he tumbled out of bed and went reeling about, sniffing into every corner of the room. To his delicate sense, a peculiar aroma was present. There was no getting away from it—something in that flat or in that room smelt of spice. It was a trivial thing, yet it worried him inordinately. He rang the bell and summoned the char. "Have you got a good nose for smells?" he asked her, in his pleasant way.

"Yes, sir."

"There's a smell in this flat that worries me."

"What kind of a smell, sir?"

"Spices, cloves and nutmegs and incense."

The woman's eyes shifted away from his uneasily. "I don't smell anything, sir. P'r'aps it's the soap." She crossed the room, lifted the soapdish off the washstand, and brought it to Dixon, smelling it herself on the way. "It is a funny kind of a smell, sir. I expect it's that."

"No, it isn't that," said Dixon solemnly.

"Then I dunno wot it can be, sir. There's no corner of the place I don't turn out."

"I suppose it couldn't be anything gone bad in the box-room?" said Dixon, in his airy way.

The woman surveyed him stolidly. "I can't say, sir, and I'm afraid there's no means of finding out."

"You might break it open," he ventured.

Despite her self-control, the woman's face changed. "Not without Mr Carew's written instructions," she said hastily. "I couldn't do it, sir. Mr Carew left me in charge of the flat, sir, and you know as well as I do that door's locked."

Dixon laughed. "I'm not going to break the door down,

you needn't frighten yourself. All the same I hate this smell. It's uncanny. It haunts me." He dropped his voice. "It's a smell that makes me think of death."

The charwoman came a few steps nearer and looked down into Dixon's eyes. "P'r'aps it's this room."

"Why this room?"

"Mr Warrington lay 'ere, sir, in his coffin, three days and three nights."

"How do you know that?"

"When I first seed you last night, sir, lyin' there with your white face, I could 'ave swore it was 'im. Mr Carew don't know it, sir, but that pink silk counterpane you're lyin' under was the same wot covered 'im; them pillowcases that your 'ead's lyin' against, sir, was the same that lied beneath 'is 'ead."

"That's rather horrible," said Mortimer Dixon, and, despite his determination that he would not let the woman know it had moved him, he detected a subtle change in his own voice.

"It is 'orrible, sir, and well you may say so." She came nearer and bent over him. "This flat is 'aunted, believe it or not, sir, as you will. Bad luck comes to whoever comes into it, sure as you lie there."

Dixon started involuntarily. Word for word, it was what the hall porter had said to him the first day he had crossed the threshold of the flat. "I am a mascot," he said, trying to speak lightly, though he was far from succeeding. "Perhaps, I'll change the luck."

"You've 'ad bad luck yourself, sir." The woman nodded ominously. "Oh, why don't you go away and leave it, sir?" She struck her two hands together earnestly. "You take my word for it, sir, and leave it soon as you're better; unlucky places aren't for the likes of gay young gentlemen like you."

"Don't you worry," said Dixon pleasantly. "I sha'n't be here more than a couple of days. Don't you wait up for me. I shall be all right."

"You're sure there's nothing else I can get you, sir?"

"Sure, thanks. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

Dixon turned over on his side and promised himself he would read for five minutes, and then go to sleep. He suddenly felt very weary; the strain he had undergone,

climaxed by his acute attack of poisoning, had gone harder with him than he thought. He pulled a book towards him and drew the light down, so that it hung directly over his head. He laid the book down, pushed the light up again and lay with closed eyes. He roused himself and drank a glass of water. He threw off the pink silk counterpane, telling himself he was too hot. He drew it back again, telling himself he was too cold. But, try as he would, he could not get to sleep. Perhaps it was his overtaxed brain. Perhaps it was the long stupor of the night before. Perhaps it was the effect of the opium still latent in his blood. Be that as it may, certain it was that Dixon, who piqued himself on his power of sleeping at all times, in all seasons, in all places, could not get to sleep that night.

He lay beneath the pink silk counterpane, and his thoughts, like the racing waters of a mill pool, surged round and round in his brain. All the thousand and one small details of the great events of the last forty-eight hours in his life came before him again, piecing themselves together like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle—each falling automatically into its place. It seemed to him, lying there in silence, that the next twenty-four hours would see the end of it. He felt so hot on the scent that, he told himself triumphantly, his quarry could not escape.

It came to him as he lay there, that it was a strangely subtle thing that he should now be lying in the bed which had formerly belonged to a dead man and now belonged to a man, who, but for him, Mortimer Dixon (who had, at the peril of his own life, once rescued Carew from drowning), would have been dead himself long ago. The thought of death and of himself who had been so near death, lying in the dead man's bed, brought back to him the charwoman's tale.

How much of it was lies to serve her own ends! How much of it was true!

Had he, too, not heard those strange patterings as of bare feet on polished boards! Had he not heard that moaning cry! Had not the hall porter's prophecy already come true, that ill luck befell those who entered the dead man's flat? Above and beyond all, what was the significance of this strange sense of restlessness, so unlike himself? Was it the result of overstrain? Or did its meaning go deeper, and was it the sinister influence of some invisible presence, the

unhappy spirit of the man who had lived there returning to revisit the place of his misery from another world?

He lay back on his pillows, and his thoughts raced round and round like the waters of a mill pond in his brain. Through it all and above it all and beneath it all, he was cognisant of that strange smell—the penetrating smell of unguents and spices, perfumes that came to him redolent of the Halls of the Dead.

The pool of light made by the electric light swinging above his bed reminded him, in its shifting, of that strange, green light which had shifted to and fro as he lay in the coffin in that mysterious room. The walls seemed as if they were becoming transparent. The furniture seemed as if it were fading away. The spell of great spaces descended on Mortimer Dixon, feverish with excitement and want of sleep. He lifted his head from the dead man's pillows. It was as if his living body had no right to that place sanctified by death.

He sat up in bed and pushed the counterpane off him. The very touch of its soft clinging reminded him that where his own hands had been had previously been the resting-place for the hands of the dead. The strange scent got stronger and stronger. There was a pattering of bare feet on the polished boards down the corridor. A cry of pain broke on his anguished ear.

Unable to bear it any longer, he threw the clothes off, sprang out of bed and rushed to the door.

There, in her nightgown, with her bare feet peeping from under its coarse folds, stood the charwoman with a cup of smoking beef tea in her hand.

"*You!*" exclaimed Dixon.

At the sound of his voice the woman gave a stifled cry and dropped the cup, which smashed to bits on the floor.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"You startled me so, sir." She lurched back away from him, with her back against the opposite wall, her eyes narrowing in anguish and fear.

"What on earth are you doing with that beef tea at this time of the night?"

The woman caught her breath audibly. It seemed to Dixon as if she were too upset to speak.

"You don't mean to say you were bringing it for me?" he cried.

"Yes, sir, that's just what I was doing." The woman grasped at his explanation with a passion of eagerness pitiful to behold. "I thought you might be 'ungry. Taking so little as you 'ave to-day, I thought you might feel a bit queer to-night, so I just up and hotted you a drop of beef tea. And now it's all spilt." She looked down at the carpet, scattered with the pieces of broken china and stained with the still steaming beef tea, the same passion of regret in her face as when Dixon had spilled the Chinaman's supper on the cellar floor.

"Never mind about the beef tea, I shouldn't have taken it in any case. I'm just as grateful as if I'd drunk a quart. I suppose I scared you nicely opening my door?"

"'Orrible, sir. I thought it was *him*."

"Well, you see for yourself I'm not a ghost," said Dixon cheerily, "and if you hear any more like me just you call and I'll come. Now get back to your bed, for goodness sake, or you'll be catching a chill."

"I'll fetch a cloth first and wipe this 'ere mess up."

"Leave it till to-morrow morning."

"I can't do that, sir, it'd stain the carpet!"

"Then take this." Dixon threw her a towel off his own towel horse. "Thank you again and good-night."

He left the woman on her knees still rubbing the carpet and returned to his bed.

Impressionable as always, the little incident had entirely shifted his mental point of view.

He was of so essentially generous a disposition that the woman's little tribute of thoughtfulness for himself obliterated all thought of what he had suffered at her hands the night before. The contact with the human being had dispelled all morbid thoughts for that night at least. "It was her poor old feet pattering down the corridor," he said to himself, "and I've no doubt the pink silk counterpane was not Warrington's at all, but Carew's. Gollypots! what a fool a man can make of himself. How that sweet little woman of mine will laugh at me when I tell her about this adventure of mine, God bless her!"

With that benediction on his lips, and love surging up in his heart, he snapped out the electric light and, snuggling his gallant young head down among the dead man's pillows, without a thought of what had gone before, or a fear of what

might be to come, with his mind at rest and his soul at peace, he commended himself to God, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOR the next two days Mortimer Dixon had, as he always said afterwards, the time of his life.

He had his breakfast in bed, and then, with one of Carew's best quilted-silk dressing-gowns on, after he had had his bath and shaved, he went and lay down on the lounge, under the awning on the little balcony, all the day long.

Twice a day the chauffeur came up to see if there were any orders, and twice a day the hall porter came up to see if there was anything he could do. Every evening, punctually at seven, he telephoned to the Plump Little Party at Brixton to tell her he was O.K. He would not write, in case her quick eyes might detect the shakiness of his handwriting, and he literally had not the energy to have a typist up from one of the offices to dictate his letter to her. He compounded with his conscience for once in his life, and let the little girl who loved him take it for granted that, as usual, he was immersed in the excitement of his work.

So, all the day long, his little sweetheart sat in her little back garden, and sewed at her wedding clothes. Every stitch she put into those simple frocks and blouses carried with it a tender thought of her lover, and a prayer for his happiness in the beautiful days that were so close at hand ; and her lover, meantime, stretched his long legs out and lay staring up at the sky, and thought of nothing in the world, not even of her.

It really was the most maddening thing when you came to think of it. Here was Dixon in the midst of a most extraordinary adventure, the like of which he had never dreamed or imagined before. He had not spared himself mentally or physically in the endeavour to pluck out the heart of the mystery. He had, indeed, in pursuit of his duty, endangered his life three times in forty-eight hours, and now he found himself weak and exhausted, stricken down on the very threshold of what, he justly considered, would be the most important piece of work he had ever undertaken and brought to a successful conclusion in the whole course of his life.

He, however, was not one of those given to useless repining. He realised that a stop had been put to his frantic exertions, and that the only thing left for a sensible man to do was to lie still and try to regain his strength. Like Saul of old, he realised it was no good "kicking against the pricks." Nor for that matter, strange as it may seem, did he feel any inclination to grumble with his lot. He had done his best, and knew it. Seeing that it was taken out of his hands through no fault of his own, the rest he was willing, in that queer reverential way of his, to leave to God.

And God was very present with Mortimer Dixon in those hours of silence and ease.

He had looked Death in the face, and, as all men do who live up to the best of themselves instead of down to the worst, he had found it the face of a friend. The shadow of that dread Valley still hung around his feet, and the mists of that darkness which men call cessation of living still clung closely to his eyes.

He lay on his back and looked up at the bright blue sky and thanked God that he had neither fear nor shame in his soul. Many a wonderful resolution he made, in those two days of quiet, set apart from the busy turmoil of life. Many vows did he make to himself, vows that in the years to come, through all temptations—and they were many and strong—he steadfastly kept. He had expected to find himself on fire to be back again in Fleet Street, pouring out his soul to the man he so revered; finding out the house of mystery; penetrating into the heart of the cellar in the little court; holding the girl he loved in his arms and telling her all he had endured; racing and tearing, as was the way of him, to get his task accomplished and claim his just reward. He had not thought it possible that he should lie quietly for two whole nights and days without any wish to work.

Yet so it was. He lay there in the sunshine and blessed the glorious sun. He lay there under the bright blue sky and blessed the exquisite vaporous outlines of the ever-changing clouds. He found a new delight in the fluttering of the leaves in the breeze. He discovered a new rapture in the glinting of the pigeons' wings. In those two days he was a poet. The strange thoughts which invaded his brain did not form themselves in stately verse, nor even shape themselves together into words, but they came to him in

lovely, silent melodies, and sang to him in dumb, immortal lays of the dreams which are the awakening of the soul.

Every three hours a dainty little tray appeared before him, and nothing ever pleased him more in his life than his generous impulse to shelter the woman who had sought to do him harm. She used to stand beside him and watch every mouthful with the maternal hunger in her eyes, like a mother watching her sick child. There was nothing that was too much trouble to do for him. There was nothing that was not put before him before he had even asked. She was just the human element needed to complete his perfect happiness. It seemed as if that great wave of repentance and gratitude which had submerged her, had washed her, clean in body and soul, up to Mortimer Dixon's feet.

While he ate, she would stand beside him, at his request, and talk. Many strange stories she told him of things she had heard, places she had seen, and people she had known. He found her gossip extraordinarily interesting. To look at life through her shrewd, dispassionate eyes, was to make him feel that he was a child learning at his mother's knee again.

Oddly enough, though she knew he was the man she had most to dread, and though he knew that she was the woman who could tell him what he wanted most to know, neither of them found any disturbing element in their mutual enjoyment of each other's society. She would talk and he would eat, and then they would part, and she would go back to her kitchen, and he would go back to his dreams again.

The only thing from the outside world that came as a disturbing element into his fantastic existence was the bill from the Army and Navy Stores.

It was an account of over four months' standing, and the total was heavy. Its items were monotonously simple: Spring chickens, green peas, strawberries and champagne. Spring chickens, green peas, strawberries and champagne. Spring chickens, green peas, strawberries and champagne.

Over and over again, these four items appeared with one variation: that here and there was an addition of salmon, and, once or twice, there cropped up a few shillings for mushrooms and cream.

Dixon read the bill over and over again. He could not make head or tail of it. At the end of an hour, his head was whirling, and his hands and feet were cold as ice again.

He put it away in his dressing-case and locked it up, for he knew that here was another link in the strange story he was unravelling, and that no good could come of his worrying over it until, once again, he was well.

So for two days he lay still and did nothing. He ate and drank and he thought, and at night he went to his bed and slept. No pattering of bare feet on polished floors awakened him. No moaning cries broke in on his happy dreams. It was as though the spell that had lain on him ever since he entered the flat was lifted. Only one thing, and that at intervals, still bothered him. That was the ever-persistent, ever-recurring fragrance that haunted him like an invisible spirit, try to banish it as he would.

Gradually it dawned upon him that this strange smell, which he disliked so much, sometimes was faint, sometimes was quite strong, and sometimes was not there at all.

On the balcony, in the fresh air, or in the drawing-room, he forgot all about it. In his bedroom it floated, a most subtle fragrance, across his senses again. In the corridor, when, to try his strength, he walked to and fro for a few minutes at a time, it came upon him fitfully, now aromatic and pungent, now hardly perceptible, but *there*; its tantalising presence, evanescent but potent, arresting his infuriated attention, even against his will.

He hated it, yet it fascinated him. It seemed to him all part and parcel of the great problem he had decided not to worry his head about; and he put it from him as best he could, even as he had locked up the bill.

On the third morning after his terrible illness, he awoke a different man.

Renewed and refreshed, he was only conscious of one sensation. As the convalescent smoker pines for a smoke, so he, insatiable worker that he was, on the first day of his convalescence, pined for work.

He had not a dream in his composition. He could not have spent ten minutes lying on the balcony that morning if he had tried. The one thing on earth that he could not understand was how he had stood it so long. The magic had been true magic, the best of its kind, but its glamour had gone. There was neither magic nor dreaming nor desire in this whole beautiful world of desires and dreams for Dixon: only a raging madness to get back to work.

Before the charwoman had brought him his first breakfast

of tea and toast, he was up and dressed. He swallowed it standing, she, the while, looking on at him with questioning eyes.

It was those eyes of hers, indeed, that pointed out to him that his time for dreaming was over, for, in their sad depths, the old suspicion had awakened to a new life. Mortimer was no longer the petted invalid over whom she watched and guarded, but the enemy whose hand was against her hand: the fighter against whom she had to put forth all her strength to guard the secret, which his clever hands would be tearing from her heart if she did not take care.

Dixon, too, recognised the necessity for this renewal of their old relations, but he realised also that it could not be helped. They had been enemies. They had been friends. They were about to be enemies again. The mere thought of her antagonism made him feel as if he were alive again.

Down the stairs he went—slowly, it is true, for he still felt most surprisingly weak—to find the hall porter cleaning the steps.

“Glad to see you down again, sir,” said the man, stopping in his work. “You’re looking pretty white, sir.”

“I’m feeling pretty white,” said Dixon. He felt, after the five flights of stairs, as if he had done a hard day’s work.

“Dr Brownlow gone out yet, do you know?”

“Never goes out till ten, sir.”

“Good. I owe you a good turn for the other evening,” Dixon said, in his pleasant way. “If you hadn’t brought the doctor up as you did, I’m afraid it would have been my coffin, and not me, that would have been going out of this hall door to-day.”

“You were pretty bad, sir, weren’t you?”

“Bad, do you call it! I’ve no inside left! By the way, it appears that you made a terrible mistake in bringing Dr Brownlow up to me.”

“Why, sir?” The man, who had returned to his scrubbing, looked up in surprise. “He’s the best doctor round about here, sir, and he lives in the flats.”

“Yes; but Mr Carew does not employ him. You know how strict these medical men are in their etiquette. They live in the twentieth century as if they’d come out of the ark.”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

"I ought to have had Mr Carew's doctor. Do you know who he is?"

"I didn't know Mr Carew had a doctor, sir."

"I understood Dr Brownlow to say that one of his colleagues attended Mr Carew several times since he came here."

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"Perhaps you were out when he came?"

"I'm never out, sir," the man said dryly.

Dixon could see he was nettled at the mere idea.

"So many people go and come," he said easily, "you can't tell one from the other. I daresay you took him for an ordinary caller."

"I should never take a doctor for an ordinary caller, sir." The man grinned at his own humour. "They've all got the mark of the pestle and mortar on their faces, whoever they are."

Dixon's pleasant laugh rang out on the clear, sweet air.

"I expect I've made a mistake," he said. "To tell you the truth, my head's been so queer that I dare say the doctor never told me anything of the kind. Anyway, I've got to thank you for a pretty good pull through. Catch hold of this, will you?" He took out a sovereign, slipped it into the porter's hand; then, cutting short the man's stammering thanks, he turned into the lift and was taken upstairs to the doctor's floor.

The doctor was at breakfast, but he saw Mortimer Dixon. He even unbent so far as to ask him to share his meal. But Dixon, though he sat at the table and watched the other man eating, refused to eat himself. Like the gambler who keeps his head free from wine till the end of the game, he had no mind to distract his attention with bacon and eggs.

"Don't you go back to work too soon," the physician said to him kindly. "You're not looking any too fit."

"I don't know what I look, but I feel as weak as a rat."

"Take my advice and take another day easy."

"Yes," Dixon answered him slowly. "I think I will. Do you know," he continued, bending forward, "I've been wondering whether there's anything wrong with that flat?"

"How wrong with it?"

"Well, you know, the first man who had it turned up his ten little toes, and you said yourself, didn't you, that my friend Carew had had a bad time as well."

The doctor's olive-skin face flushed scarlet. He pushed

away his cup. "Look here," he said shamefacedly, "I owe you an explanation and an apology, Mr Dixon."

"How's that?"

"To tell you the truth," said Doctor Brownlow, "I did an unjustifiable thing. There seemed to me something so queer about your illness—you don't look to me the kind of man who drinks or drugs, you haven't the first symptom of such a thing about you—that I got asking questions of both your woman and the man downstairs. Their accounts of your arrival were so conflicting, and the pair of them seemed to know so little about you—no one knew your private address or where you really belonged, that I didn't feel at all satisfied, especially seeing the precarious state you were in. I therefore felt myself constrained to go the length of wiring to Mr Carew, whose address the hall porter gave me, to ask one or two questions about you, questions you couldn't answer yourself." He stopped short and looked at Dixon with the delightful air of a penitent child. "It was abominable of me to do it, of course."

Dixon burst out laughing. "Oh, so it was you, was it, who wired about me to Berlin?" He shoved his hand into his coat-pocket—Carew's coat-pocket to be quite plain—and drew out a telegram.

"I got this from Carew yesterday." He slipped it out of the envelope and read it aloud :

"'What the devil are you up to? People do nothing but keep sending me wires to know who you are. For goodness sake get your christening certificate and carry it about with you. What with my uncle raging in bed with the gout and the girl he wants me to marry having red hands a long nose and flat feet I've got my hands full without being bothered with you. Ever thine. REGINALD CAREW.'"

The two men burst out laughing together.

"So I'm not the only one," said the physician, refilling his cup. "Thank heaven for that!"

"The wire looks as if there'd been several applications for my references," said Dixon, surveying it. "Friend Hall Porter sent one; he told me so. I don't know who the others were."

"Perhaps the lady who condescends to wait on you in the flat. She didn't look best pleased to have you there, I

thought." He darted a queer look over his glasses at Dixon's ingenuous countenance. "I thought she knew more about that attack of yours than she was willing to make out."

"She!" exclaimed Dixon, with consummate ease. "My dear man, she's a miracle! She makes the most wonderful beef tea. She makes toast like an angel. She makes chicken broth like a Peri! I grant you she's not a houri to the casual glance, but, to a connoisseur, there's a depth in that eye, a latent passion in that smile!" He turned his sparkling blue eyes on the doctor's amazed face. "If I were only sure she were a widow, I should marry her at once."

"I shouldn't!" said the physician dryly. "If I'm any judge of faces, that fair lady, who cooks like an angel and who has charms revealed only to a connoisseur like yourself, would be capable of going to any extremity—I wouldn't even draw the line at crime—if anything or anyone came between her and the thing she desired."

"Now that's most interesting," said Dixon cordially. "I'm very keen on psychology myself. There's nothing on earth interests me so much as the human face. If I were rich I should devote myself entirely to the study of man."

"And woman?"

"And woman. She's even more wonderful than man."

"She is, indeed," said the other, in his quiet, impressive way. "She is subtle; she is secretive; she is never to be depended upon from one moment to the other, for she is ruled by her passions—which she calls her emotions—far more than men, who for the most part have neither the one nor the other, but who are only ruled by their desires." He lifted his finger and shook it at Dixon. "That woman of yours upstairs is only a common charwoman. She has no position. She possibly has a bad heredity. She probably has no education whatever. Yet, put that woman in a position of responsibility and, if it suited her own purposes, there is nothing she couldn't accomplish, so superb is her self-control, so secretive is her mentality, and so determined is the strength of her will."

"You don't take long making up your mind about people, do you?"

"I don't believe in making up my mind," said the doctor. "I rely entirely on my instinct as far as personality goes. I come to my conclusions—erroneous or otherwise—at a glance."

Mortimer Dixon leaned forward in his chair. "What price me?"

The doctor smiled. "You, my young friend, will always puzzle other people because you so often puzzle yourself. You have the nervous system of a highly strung woman one way, and in another you have no nerves at all. You've a self-assurance that is a kind of genius in itself. You're one of the men whose ambition is limitless, because there's no limit that your ambition may not hope to reach. Your face contradicts itself in just the same way as your character. You have the eye of a psychic; the skull of a highly developed criminal; the brow of a statesman; the delicate ears of a sensitive woman, and the capable hands of a business man. With such a combination a man can go far. I've no doubt, with ordinary care, that you will."

Dixon stared at him in silence. It seemed to him as if he were suddenly made of glass and those keen, scrutinising eyes were reading him through and through. "Every man has one weakness," the pitiless voice continued. "If I don't mistake, your trouble is sex. Be careful of women. They will never be careful for *you*."

Dixon went scarlet all over. He pushed his chair and jumped to his feet. "I say," he exclaimed, in his boyish way, "you're a jolly sight too clever for me! I'm off."

"Am I right or wrong?"

"So right that I think if you read my charwoman as well as you've read me, I'd better go and dismiss her with a month's wages on the spot."

"You'd do a very wise thing if you did so." The doctor paused in his breakfast, and held out his hand, looking very kindly at the gallant young figure towering above him. When the flush had died away Mortimer Dixon's face showed up very white and pinched for all the gaiety of his eyes and smile. "You go upstairs, my dear fellow, and stretch those long legs of yours out on that couch, and spend the day meditating on your sins. I've no doubt you'll find plenty to keep yourself occupied."

"I've no doubt I shall," Dixon answered him, laughing. He grasped the hand, shook it with real cordiality and turned to go. At the door he stopped, as if a sudden thought had struck him. "Did I dream it," he asked, "or did you tell me we ought to have called in another doctor as Carew had been ill himself?"

"You didn't dream it, my young friend," the physician returned dryly. He tranquilly returned to his egg.

"Do you know who the doctor was?"

The queer, sharp glance over the glasses disconcerted Mortimer Dixon again. "His name is Findlay Marshall. His address is 107 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square. If, as I imagine, you intend calling upon him to inquire the details of your friend's illness, you will find your reception less disconcerting if you mention my name."

"Thanks very much."

Dixon was uncommonly glad to find himself on the other side of the door.

CHAPTER XXIX

FOR once in his life he had met his own match. The man he had just left had exactly the same qualities he most prided himself on—instinct and audacity. Charming attributes in oneself—slightly disconcerting in other people at times.

He mentally jotted down the name and address of Findlay Marshall and rang up the lift. He felt himself unequal to the strain of the stairs.

"Glad to see you down again, sir," said the liftman, who, in common with most people of his class, had been attracted to Dixon on the day he had stood watching him grovelling about on his knees in the hall looking for the pearls. "Sorry to hear you've had such a bad time, sir."

"Thanks awfully," said Dixon brightly. "I've been pretty bad."

"Must be very lonely for you up there in that flat alone, sir." The man looked at him queerly. "Find it comfortable, sir?"

"Ay, thank you," Dixon answered him. To himself he said: "Friend Hall Porter's been talking again, I can see. This man knows all that there is to know about that dreary tragedy at the top of the house."

"The lady whose pearls you helped to find on the day you arrived, sir, is coming back to-day."

"Indeed?" Insensibly Dixon's eyes began to sparkle. "When?"

"She's expected this afternoon, sir. The hall porter gave me a wire just now telling me to get coals up for the kitchen. They don't use a gas cooker in their flat, sir."

Dixon saw his opportunity and jumped at it. "Doesn't it make an awful mess bringing the coals up these stairs?"

"We don't bring the coals up the front way, sir. I only wish we could."

"How do you take them up, then?"

"By the outside staircase, sir. I daresay you've noticed a little iron staircase that runs outside the flats?"

Dixon nodded. "Do you mean you carry them up those steps?"

"Bound to, sir. Back-breaking work it is too. Eighty-four steps in all. Thank goodness most of the tenants use gas."

"There ought to be an outside lift."

"There would have been, sir, but some of the tenants complained. That staircase was only built in case there was a fire or an emergency of some kind."

"I should have thought that they were built for the use of burglars only," Dixon said, following out his own line of thought.

"*Burglars*, sir?" The man stared at him.

"They'd only have to get in by the front door, conceal themselves during the daytime, walk up the stairs and help themselves, and walk back again at night."

The man's grin was a sight to behold. "There's no burglar'll come up those steps, sir. They know a trick worth two of that."

"Why not?" asked Dixon.

"There's a gate at the bottom, sir, fastened with a Yale patent lock. The coals are only allowed to be carried up between nine and ten; one of the men belonging to the flats stands at the bottom all the time until the gate is shut. A lot of fuss for nothin', to my way of thinkin', seein' you can only get to that gate through the hall porter's quarters."

"Then what would be the use of the staircase in the event of fire?"

Again the man smiled expansively. "Each of the tenants has a key to that, sir. There's a clause in their agreements that it's only to be used in case of great emergency or fire."

"I see; but how would they get out of the place if the

flats *were* on fire? They'd be roasted to death in the backyard."

"No, sir; they'd get out into Charles Street through the gate in the wall."

"Do they have a key for that, too?"

"Same key fits both gates, sir."

"I see," said Mortimer Dixon for the second time. The lift stopped. He tipped the man half-a-crown and got out.

He was tired, but the blood ran warm within him. In half-an-hour he had learned three most important things. From the hall porter he had learned that Reginald Carew had not been ill, and had had no doctor to see him. From the doctor he had learned that he understood his friend Dr Findlay Marshall had attended Carew when he was ill. From the liftman he had discovered the exact value of the outside stairs.

After his long period of quiescent inactivity he felt that he was his own man again.

Over his breakfast he alluded to the staircase and asked about the key. "I'm rather nervous about fire," he informed the charwoman, who watched him with the face of a sphinx.

"Are you, sir? I don't think there's any need to be in these flats. Very few of the tenants here *have* coal fires, except the lady that lives opposite, and an old gentleman who's mostways away, and lives downstairs."

"All the same, I should like to feel that I have the key in my possession." Dixon said, still covertly watching her.

"That's easy done, sir." She crossed the room and from the little brass nail concealed behind the looking-glass she unhooked a small Yale key. "Mr Carew's like yourself, sir, nervous about fire. The key's hung there ever since he came to the flat." She held it out to him as she spoke.

"Leave it where it is," said Dixon, pursuing his meal with appetite. "I'm quite satisfied now I know where it is."

The woman hung the little key up on the nail and went out of the room.

He was still at breakfast when the chauffeur was shown in.

"Will you be requiring me again to-day, sir?"

"I think I shall require you always," said Dixon, with an affectionate look at the stalwart young man who had played such an important part in his life. He held out his hand

and the other gripped it. "Just you wait till I get on a bit in the world, and you'll see what kind of a car we'll drive. Sit down and have some breakfast."

"Thank you, sir, but I've breakfasted already." He was one of those rare souls who accepted a position of trust without taking advantage—a man who could be admitted into close intimacy and never presume on it; a rare gift at all times, and one which carries its owner far.

"Then you'd better not wait. All I want you to do is to run round to Mrs Latham's and fetch them what they want; and then," he lowered his voice, "go to Dr Findlay Marshall, 107 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, and find out if he's in town. Then go to Gerard's, Regent Street, and buy the biggest bunch of roses that they've got. Trundle them over in your little barrow to Brixton—you know the address—and see if you can get a glimpse of my little girl. Then you do what you like for the rest of the day. Go and fetch your own girl and take her for a ride, or go up in a balloon, or go to the Exhibition and have a gay time, or do anything you like. I shan't require you again to-day."

"Thank you, sir."

"To-morrow morning, you turn up here bright and early, about nine. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Here's your fiver. Go and enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, sir. I think, if you don't mind, I'll give you a look in again to-night."

"There's no need," Dixon assured him. "I'm as right as rain."

"You don't look it, sir."

"Well, I feel it. I've eaten an enormous breakfast, and I'm going to lie out on that blessed couch under that blessed sun all the day." He stopped short as the electric bell rang loud and long. "Just see who that is."

In a moment the man returned.

"It's the telephone people, sir. They want your permission to get out on the roof; there's something wanting doing to the telephone wires overhead."

"Right. Just tell the old girl, will you?" The man turned on his heel, when Dixon sprang across the room and caught him by the arm. "Don't trouble about that; I'll see the man myself." He stepped out into the corridor and beckoned to the man. "You want to get

out on the roof, do you? What's wrong with the wire?"

"We don't rightly know, sir, until we've been outside."

"Will it affect my telephone?" Dixon asked them.

The elder man of the two, a very superior person with an excellent manner, stepped forward. "I'm afraid it'll put it out of gear for a few hours, sir, but you may be quite sure that we sha'n't inconvenience you a moment longer than we can help."

By this time the charwoman, attracted by the sound of the new voices, appeared on the scene. "These are some people from the telephone," Dixon told her. "They want to go out on the roof. Do you know where the trapdoor is?"

"I haven't any idea, sir."

"Perhaps you know where it is?" Dixon turned to the telephone men.

"Probably in the room where the telephone is, sir."

"Hardly," said Dixon. "That would be in the study." He threw open the door of the room as he spoke and the men, following him, went in.

It was the first time since his illness that Mortimer Dixon had entered this room. The sun was on the other side of the house, and the place, despite its handsome furniture, looked unutterably dreary and dull. That atmosphere of unusedness which seems always to hang about a room not in constant use, was strikingly instanced in the closed windows and the closely drawn blinds. The curtains were dark red with a green border. Dixon recalled the fact that he had hated them on sight.

He felt a perfect agony of apprehension seize him, just as it had seized him on the day when he had first entered it. He stood apart; listening to the men discussing the possibility of the trapdoor, and pointing out to each other in quiet undertones that it must be elsewhere.

"They'd never be so stupid as to put a trapdoor in one of the best rooms in the flat, sir." The well-spoken man addressed himself to Dixon direct.

Dixon started as if he had been touched on the raw. As a matter of fact he had forgotten all about the telephone. He was conscious of only one thing, that the smell which he so detested was strongly assailing his nostrils again.

So horrible was the sensation of nausea that he felt physic-

ally sick. He pulled himself together, and told the char-woman to take the telephone men over the flat until they found the trapdoor, and got himself out of the room.

Back in the cool, sweet, fresh drawing-room, the sensation passed almost as quickly as it had seized him.

The chauffeur, however, noticed that he looked extremely pale. "Anything upset you, sir?" he inquired anxiously. "You're looking very queer."

"I'm feeling very queer." Dixon shut the door softly and beckoned to the man. "I want you to smell my hand," he said under his breath.

"Smell your hand, sir?"

"Take it in both of yours and smell it. Smell it for all you're worth!"

The man did as the doctor had done before him. With an expression of absolute bewilderment, he sniffed at Dixon's hand inside and out.

"Well, what does it smell of?"

"I'm not much of a one with my nose, sir, but to me it smells like carbolic soap."

"That's what I used this morning," Dixon said half to himself. "Can't you smell anything else, man?" he added impatiently. "Don't you smell anything like cloves and nutmegs. Don't only smell my hands; smell my clothes and my hair."

The man did as he was told.

"Well, now, do you smell anything else?"

The man surveyed him stolidly.

"I can't make anything else out of it except carbolic soap and"—he sniffed again at the closely cropped curls—"some kind of hair oil, sir."

"What kind of hair oil?" Dixon asked him eagerly. "What does it remind you of, spices and cloves?"

"Nothing like that, sir. It smells more like violet oil."

"Violet oil it is."

"Did you want me to smell anything else, sir?"

"I didn't want you to, but I hoped to the Lord you would."

"Why, sir, do *you* smell anything else?"

"Good God, man! my life is made hell on earth to me with this infernal smell."

"You asked me that once before, you know, sir," the

chauffeur told him, "when you was lying ill. I hope you're not feeling badly again, sir?"

"Yes, I remember." Dixon began to laugh. "You thought I was off my head, didn't you? Well, I wasn't, any more than I am now. But the smell persists."

He threw back his head and sniffed delicately. "It's a smell of dust and ashes. It's a smell of strange places. It's a smell of mystery and death. . . . It holds some meaning for me. It brings me a message. . . ." His eyes dilated and he stood quite still, listening, as if he almost expected to hear someone speak.

The chauffeur, good fellow that he was, watched him anxiously. He could not make head or tail of it all.

"They've found the trapdoor, sir." The charwoman appeared on the threshold.

Dixon started. Her prosaic, commonplace voice recalled his mind from strange thoughts. "Oh, they have, have they? Where is it?"

"In the study, sir."

"In the study?" Dixon stared at her blankly. "Whereabouts?"

"Them panels in the ceiling, sir, by the bookcase. They lift up. You can't see that there's a 'ole, but there is."

"Are they out on the roof?"

"No; they're bringing up the ladder now." She turned her head, and looked over her shoulder. "They're just coming in, sir." She glared resentfully at the telephone men, and disappeared through the green-baize door.

"So it is in the study after all, is it?" said Dixon to the men who were carrying in a short stepladder through the hall door.

"Yes, sir. Would you like to come in and see for yourself?"

"No, thanks. How long are you going to be?"

"That all depends on the mischief, sir. I don't suppose we shall be long. Shall we let you know when we disconnect you, sir?"

"Yes, please." Dixon felt horribly ashamed of himself, but he could not bring himself to face that study again. He left the men to their work, and told the chauffeur to go.

"Shall I bring you back a message from the young lady, sir?"

Dixon shook his head. "No; I want no messages to-day."

"I'd like to give you a look in to-night, sir."

Again Dixon shook his head. "There's no need for you to worry about me. I'm as right as rain."

He laid a kindly hand on the chauffeur's shoulder, and told him to be off.

CHAPTER XXX

THE man gone, Dixon went out on to the balcony and sat there inhaling great draughts of the clean, sweet air. Then he laid himself down once again, and set himself steadfastly to think out the exact position of things. "I've gone so far and now I'm up against a dead wall. What lies behind it?"

For a moment he was tempted to take a cab and go down to Fleet Street, and lay his difficulties at the feet of the man whose brain was said—and justly—to belong to one of the most remarkable mentalities in Europe. But the same arrogant personality which had made him face almost certain death as a youngster rather than seek the advice of older and wiser men, came to his aid once more. "I'm not going to him to ask for advice," he said to himself. "If I can't do it on my own, then let somebody else do it for me. I'll wait till to-morrow when I'm a bit stronger and then . . ." He set his teeth and the outline of his square jaw lightened ominously. "Till then there's nothing for me to do but to wait."

So Mortimer Dixon waited.

And as he waited he stared persistently at the little iron staircase which was only to be used in cases of emergency or fire.

He thought of the little key hanging behind the back of the mantelpiece. He thought of the man who had waited below while his mate brought up the coals. He thought of the little door in the garden that led out on to quite a different street. Rallying his vivid imagination, he tried to picture to himself a vision of the great block of flats devoured by flames, and a crowd of terrified men and women, some in resplendent dresses and jewels, some in a petticoat and a shawl, some with naked arms and bare feet, rushing and screaming and cursing each other down that little staircase,

because the way to safety was so narrow, and the way to destruction was so wide.

But it was useless. For once his imagination failed to respond to his desire.

The longer he looked at the staircase, the more vividly he had the impression of a stealthy figure stealing up the stairs in the dim light, and disappearing noiselessly through the French windows of the drawing-room in the next flat.

As he looked, those same windows were thrown suddenly open, and a gay voice came floating to him on the air. He recognised one of those voices instantly. It was the voice of the charming girl with the little Chinese dog and the pearls.

It seemed only a second before the whole place took on an atmosphere of life and light. The blinds sprang up, the elegant lace curtains appeared. All the windows seemed to open simultaneously. Air-loving Dixon felt his own spirits rise at the sight. He heard the shrill barking of the little dog. He heard the shrill chattering of a canary. He heard bangings and bouncing as of heavy luggage being let on to the floor. He leaned forward eagerly, glad of anything to take his thoughts away from himself and the work which so obsessed his soul, and, to his delight, the charming figure of the elegant girl appeared on the balcony outside.

She had on a delightful white dress, and a large hat trimmed with pink roses. There was a bunch of the same roses at her slender waist. In her ungloved hand she held a ridiculous little watering-pot with a silver handle, and, with her back turned to him, he heard her call to a maid to bring her some water for the flowers.

Entranced, he watched her bending over the roses, caressing and cajoling them as if they were alive.

"The poor darlings are simply dying for water," he heard her say. "Pretty dears! Why wasn't there any nice, kind rain?"

A smart maid, with a French cap and a bright, fresh face, appeared in the window, behind her mistress. Her little lace apron and her spotless cap were an added delight to Dixon's eye.

The whole scene was so animated, so utterly removed from all thought of gloom and illness and death, such as had been his portion for the last two days, that he felt as if a burden had been lifted from his shoulders—even as a man

might feel who, ascending from a mine, comes into the light again.

The two young women, each so delightfully typical of her particular class, chattered together in the most animated way. The little canary in his gilt cage was hung out on a nail. He almost fancied he could see the little throat swelling and pulsing with its burden of song at the sight of the sun, and the touch of the fragrant air. The little Chinese Chow came out on the balcony, too. His shrill barking added to the gaiety of the scene. Dixon felt as if he could stay still no longer. He simply ached to put his long legs over the dividing rail, and ask permission to help water the flowers.

As if his unspoken wish had been granted by a magician, at that moment the pretty girl on the balcony looked across, and caught sight of him lying there.

"Goodness gracious! is that *you*?" she exclaimed, and extricating a gay little hand from a silver water-pot she waved it at him.

Dixon jumped to his feet. "Yes," he called out, "it's me!"

"What on earth are you lying down for? I never thought *you* were a lazy thing."

"I'm not lazy. I've been busy watching you."

The girl's gay laughter came floating across to him, sweet and clear.

"If you were worth your salt you'd come over here and help me," she called out.

Before the words were well out of her mouth, Dixon had realised his unspoken desire, and was by her side.

"How ill you look: been eating too many strawberries? I've been eating simply pailfuls. Get out of the way, darling"—this to the dog. "I've simply been gorging on strawberries and cream. If you don't shut up, my little lamb, I'll strangle you"—this to the canary. "What have you been doing with yourself since I left? *I've* been having simply the time of my life. Oh! look at those poor, darling roses! I feel just like a murderer! I do think you might have noticed them, and hopped over here with a watering-pot."

Dixon looked at her, enchanted. Her gay babbling, and her beautiful, animated face seemed to him the most delightful things he had ever seen or heard.

There was no need for him to talk. There was no need for him to answer her questions. As her friends always told her, she talked enough for ten. Before five minutes were over she had told him of the horses she had ridden, of her host the old scientist, who thought of nothing but bottles and bugs; of his sister, the hostess, who lived on Grape Nuts and thought every man was going to propose; of the young men who had fallen in love with her; of the frocks she had worn, and the things she had eaten, and her old grandfather's rages, and the ripping games she had had!

Out it all poured to him, without the slightest hesitation or significance. It reminded him of nothing so much as the golden canary in its golden cage, singing its heart out in the golden sun. When she paused for breath, she asked him to lunch. Before he had refused, she asked him to tea. He had barely got out a semi-acceptance before she had asked him to dine.

"We've two of the most delightful old dears coming you ever saw in your life," she declared. "You really must come. They're too quaint for words. I can't tell you who they are, for I can never remember their darling names. But they're simply perfect. Last time they came they had on blue silk petticoats, with gold things all crawling up, and red silk stockings and the sweetest little caps you ever beheld—scarlet and green."

"Good heavens! I don't wonder they looked quaint. I should have hardly thought such a style of dress would have appealed to *you*?"

"Why-ever not?" She opened her dazzling blue eyes, and looked up at him like a child.

"I can hardly imagine you in a blue silk petticoat with gold things wriggling up," he answered her.

You should have heard her laugh. "I'm not a man, silly!"

This time it was Mortimer Dixon's turn to stare. "A man?"

"Why, of course, the dear, sweet things always dress like that."

"Do they indeed!" Dixon answered her solemnly. "May I ask who the dear, sweet things are?"

"Chinese mandarins, of course."

It was then that Dixon realised how ill he had been. Well for him that the young beauty was bending over her

roses with her back to him. He had to clutch at the balcony to save himself from swaying. He felt himself going white to the lips.

"You'll come to dinner, won't you?"

"You bet I will."

The girl went off into shrieks of gay laughter. "The dear, sweet things, they bring their own little bowls, oh, such darlings, all ivory, with their dear little 'chopsticks,' all ivory and gold, and they make *such* eyes at me!" She wagged her golden head at Mortimer Dixon. "They're in love with me, you know."

"I don't wonder," said he.

The beautiful child—for child she was—skipped with delight. "Nice man! I hope you mean to be in love with me too."

"I'm engaged to be married," Dixon answered her, and something that had not been there a moment before crept into his sparkling blue eyes.

"So you mentioned before," the beauty said dryly. Then she began to giggle again. "Silly thing! it's only my fun." She put her enchanting little face up to his and raised herself on tiptoe. "Don't tell anybody," she whispered, "my people are horrified, but I'm going to marry your friend Carew."

"So you told *me* before!" said Dixon. But all the same he felt the nearness of that enchanting personality, and his heart was beating a good deal faster than he liked. "Am I really to come to dinner?" he asked her.

"Of course you are." She darted back into the room and shrieked for her aunt. "It's Mortimer Dixon," she informed the elegantly dressed woman who appeared on the scene. "You know, the person Reggie is always talking about, who does such wonderful things, and you needn't be afraid of *his* falling in love with me, because he's engaged to be married and I've just told him, so am I." She flung her arms round the elder woman's shoulder and gave her an affectionate hug. "She doesn't like me to say that I'm engaged to poor, darling Reggie, but I am, you dear old darling! and what's more, I'm going to marry him. I am, I am, I am!" She gave her another hug, and skipped away from her outraged relative back on to the balcony, leaving her aunt and Dixon to make acquaintance on their own.

"She's nothing but a child," Mrs Dalrymple said, smiling

indulgently in the direction of the exquisite white figure out in the dazzling sunshine. "You mustn't take any heed of what she says." She held out her hand with great cordiality. "I've heard so much of you already from Mr Carew, and from my niece, who told me of your great kindness to her the other day in the matter of helping her to find her pearls, that I feel as though we were good friends already. Indeed, my obligation to you is more than I can say, for the pearls are heirlooms to which a certain romantic value is attached. My father sets an enormous affection upon them, and it would have been a bad day's work for my niece if they had been lost."

"I'm very glad I was lucky enough to be on the spot," said Dixon, in his easy, pleasant way.

Mrs Dalrymple looked at him. "From Reginald Carew's account of you, I should have expected something a great deal more robust than you appear at present. I hope you have not been ill?"

"I'm only just recovering from a slight attack of blood-poisoning, which has pulled me down out of all proportion to its gravity."

"Blood-poisoning is a serious thing, Mr Dixon. I hope you have taken good advice? Some of you young men are so careless about your health."

"I'm not. I can't afford to be. I daresay you know the doctor who attended me. He lives in these flats."

"Dr Brownlow? I know him quite well. Then you are indeed in good hands. He is a personal friend of my own."

An agonised scream from outside brought both Dixon and Mrs Dalrymple out of the room. "What on earth is the matter?" they exclaimed.

"It's Chow! My own darling Chow!" The excited girl pointed frantically to Dixon's balcony. "He's squeezed himself through there again. Oh, do fetch him, Mr Dixon, or he'll be lost."

"Gracious!" exclaimed her aunt. "I thought you'd fallen over."

"I thought you'd lost your pearls again!"

But the girl paid no heed to either of them. She stamped her pretty little foot with fury at Dixon. "Oh! why do you stand there talking? Why don't you fetch my little Chow! my precious little darling! I'll never speak to you again if he's lost."

"How *can* he be lost, child?" cried her aunt. "He's only in Mr Dixon's flat."

"I don't care where he is. I want him back. The doors may be open, and he may get out on the stairs. He's worth two hundred and fifty pounds. The first person who saw him would be sure to snap him up."

By this time Dixon was over the dividing trelliswork, and through the window, into the drawing-room of his own flat. "What's his name?" he called out as he went.

"Ting," screamed the girl.

He began calling the dog in his most dulcet tones. But no little whining voice answered him.

He dashed about, looking under the chairs and tables, and even lifting the cushions, but there was no dog to be seen. The door leading into the corridor was open and he immediately went outside and began calling the dog in the different rooms. It flashed across him with a kind of horror that the telephone men were on the premises. To his satisfaction, however, he perceived that the hall door was shut.

At the sound of his repeated callings, the charwoman appeared. "Were you calling *me*, sir?"

"No, I'm calling the dog."

"The dog, sir?"

"Miss Dalrymple's little Chinese Chow. She's the lady who lives in the flat adjoining this. He got through from her balcony on to ours."

"Perhaps he's out on the balcony, sir?"

"No. The window was open and I saw him run into the drawing-room, myself."

"I'll go and look, sir. He's not in the drawing-room?"

"No. He's somewhere in here." He began calling again. But no dog was to be seen. In another moment he heard the young girl outside screaming his own name. Thinking that the little creature had been found, he went back through the drawing-room on to the balcony outside.

"Have you got him? Have you found him? Where is he? Oh, my goodness! you *haven't* got him! Don't tell me he's lost."

"Of course he isn't lost."

"But you haven't found him?"

"But I will in a minute."

"No, you won't. You'll never find him again. He's

lost! My darling little Chow is lost! I knew it. I said it!"

"Hush, darling; hush! He'll be found in a minute," her aunt said, trying to soothe her down.

But the girl was far too excited to listen to her aunt or to anyone else. Great tears were running down her face, and she was wringing her hands, a picture of exquisite misery, screaming out the name of her lost pet. "I can't wait here any longer. I'm sure I can find him. Help me over! I'm coming into your flat!"

"My darling, don't be so absurd! Mr Dixon will find him for you."

But her aunt might as well have spoken to the wind. "I know I shall find him. He'll know my voice. Help me over, *quick!*" She extended her arms and Dixon, who thought it very likely that the little animal would respond to her voice rather than to a stranger's, lifted her up bodily and in another moment she stood on the other side of the balcony with him.

"Ting! Ting! Ting! Precious pet! Come to your own Mitty!" The excited young beauty dashed into the corridor, calling at the top of her voice.

For the next half-an-hour confusion reigned supreme. They called, they cried, they looked, they searched, they cajoled, they entreated, but no dog was to be found.

"But where can he be?" Dixon exclaimed perplexedly. "We've looked everywhere."

"He's so small and so valuable!" sobbed the girl; "he's worth two hundred and fifty pounds. Anyone might be glad to steal him." She glared with beautiful, angry eyes at the charwoman, who had been the most energetic of the three in prosecuting the search.

"If you think I've stole him, miss, you're mistook!" The charwoman glared back with outraged dignity at the girl.

"Now look here, both of you, don't be silly," Dixon intervened, laying a hand on the shoulder of each. "No one suspects *you* of having stolen the dog," he said to the charwoman, "and no one is offended at anything *you* say, because you're so upset at the loss of your pet. It stands to reason the dog must be somewhere. I saw him go in through my windows, and the hall door was not open. Therefore he must be somewhere here. It is no good getting excited. Let's

look quietly again." He turned to the young girl, who stood sobbing quietly beside him. "The telephone men are out on the roof doing something to the telephone. Perhaps he's run up there. I'll go up and get him down."

"Out on the roof? The telephone men? Why on earth didn't you say so before? Of course they've got him! Of course he's out on the roof. Oh, my darling Ting! They've stolen him! I shall never see him again."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Mortimer Dixon shortly. "He can't have got out on the roof, because this door was shut."

"Then why haven't we looked in here before?"

"Because, I tell you, the door was shut. Not even a Chow can open a door." In his own heart he knew very well why he had not opened the door. He loathed the room with an unspeakable loathing. Each time he went into it he dreaded the sensations which it aroused in him, more and more.

"The telephone men 'ave gone, sir," said the charwoman quietly.

Dixon whipped round on her. "Gone? When did they go?"

"About 'alf-an-hour ago."

"There! what did I tell you! While *we've* been looking in these ridiculous places, *they've* gone off, and taken my dog."

"They've done nothing of the kind," said Mortimer Dixon quietly; but he spoke only to reassure her. He was not at all sure that she was not right. He opened the study door and went in, followed by the charwoman and the excited girl. "The ladder is still there," he said. "If they've gone, why haven't they taken it away and shut the trap."

"They haven't finished, sir. They're coming back."

"Yes, *they're* coming back, but they won't bring my dog! Oh, my little angel! My precious pet! I shall never see you again."

"For heaven's sake, stop crying!" Dixon implored her. "Go into the drawing-room and wait. I'll go out on to the roof."

"No, I'll wait here." She plumped herself down in the revolving chair and, putting her slender young elbows on to the writing-table, hid her face and sobbed aloud.

Something in the sight of the girl, the thought of her

standing a few minutes before so gay, so delightfully pretty, surrounded by her roses, her pet and her bird ; and the contrast of her sitting in the chair where a man had, only a few months before, taken his own life, and where he, himself, had experienced such extraordinary emotion, upset him unduly. Even more angry with himself than sorry for the girl, he ran up the short stepladder and got out on to the roof. "The flat's unlucky," he said, as he went up the steps. "Bad luck comes to everyone whose foot crosses the threshold of this house."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE roof, as is the case with most blocks of London flats, was flat, with a low parapet running round it. But for the chimney-stacks and the drain-pipes, it presented a perfectly even surface. Dixon saw at a glance that the dog was not there, but, just to satisfy himself, he explored the entire roof, not only of his own block of flats, but of the other two which adjoined it. He went over the whole place, looking into every nook and cranny, going so far as to peer down the chimney and gutters ; but no dog was to be seen. He returned to the trapdoor and came down the stepladder, at the foot of which the beautiful girl was standing in a state of suspense.

"You've found him?" she said.

It went to his heart that he could not say yes. "No, I've not. He's not up there."

"Let *me* go up."

"It's useless. The place is as flat as the palm of your hand. I've gone over every inch."

"Perhaps the poor darling ran up the steps and got giddy, and flung himself over?"

"He couldn't do that," said Dixon dryly : "the parapet's much too high."

"Then those telephone men have stolen him."

"I don't believe it," Dixon replied stoutly.

"How do you know?"

"I spoke to the man in charge. I'd stake my life he's no thief."

"When are they coming back?" She turned excitedly to the charwoman.

"In about half-an-hour, miss; when they've 'ad their lunch."

"Perhaps they left the door open when they went." She turned frantically to the charwoman. "Please go down-stairs at once and ask the hall porter if he's seen my dog."

For a moment the woman hesitated.

"At once, please," said Dixon quietly. "It's a pity we didn't think of it before."

It was evident that the woman did not want to go, but there was nothing for it but to do as she was told.

"I hate that woman." The beautiful child turned to Dixon with her great eyes full of tears. "She's a beast."

"Why? Have you ever seen her before?"

"Yes, often. You see, she was here when Reginald took the flat and——" A smile began to peep out of the corner of her eyes, and her lips went down. "You see, my people won't hear of my being engaged to poor, darling Reggie, so when auntie was going out I used to say I had a headache and——" She looked up at Dixon like a naughty child. She reminded him of nothing so much as of an April sky, with the tears in her eyes and the gay light flashing all over her face.

"And I suppose Carew used to come into your flat?"

She put her pretty fingers to her lips, and shook her dainty head. "No, he didn't," she said, in a solemn whisper: "I used to go into his!"

"You *didn't*!"

"I *did*. It was the most ripping lark I ever had in my life. The kitchens look out on the other side, and even if they didn't, it wouldn't have mattered. The servants simply adore me. They'd never have told. I used to come to the edge of the balcony and Reggie used to help me over, just as you did now. That's why poor darling Ting rushed off here, don't you see? I used to bring him in here with me when I came to tea."

"I see. Your dog was your chaperon?"

"My chaperon? Dear, darling, little Chow!" The laughter died out of her eyes, and she began to cry again. "Oh, what shall I do without him! You've no idea what a darling he is! And Reggie is so fond of him too, and he's simply devoted to Reggie. We used to stay in the drawing-room so that we might keep one eye on the balcony. I arranged with one of the maids to wave a pink silk handker-

chief out of my room window when she heard auntie's key in the door." She broke off suddenly. "Let's go in there now. I hate this beastly room."

Dixon's eyes dilated. "Why? It's a beautiful room."

"I don't care, I *hate* it! It's so stuffy and, I don't know," she puckered her pretty brows—"it always seems to me there's such a queer smell."

"What kind of a smell?" Dixon wondered if she heard his voice change.

"A stuffy kind of smell. I can't describe it." She sniffed again. "I can smell it now. Can't you? Like a grocer's shop."

He went hot all over. "*A grocer's shop!*" Then it *had not* been only his imagination. "Do you smell it now?"

The girl lifted her delicate nose and sniffed. "Yes. A kind of a spicy smell. Can't *you* smell it?"

"I think I know what you mean," he said slowly.

"Well, I'm glad of that," she exclaimed. "Reggie, silly old darling, always said he could smell nothing. He used to aggravate me so that, at last, I wouldn't come into this room at all." Her voice dropped and her great eyes opened up at Dixon until they looked like strange blue flowers. "One day I was nearly caught. Some people came, and Reggie had to entertain them in the drawing-room. I had to stay in here alone. I sat here waiting until those old frumps of his went, and the smell got stronger and stronger until I felt perfectly sick. Just as I was making up my mind I couldn't stand it any longer," her eyes opened still wider, "I heard a kind of moan."

"A moan?"

"Um," she nodded her golden head. "Such a queer kind of noise, as if somebody was in pain. That finished me. I didn't care if I was caught or if I wasn't. I just dashed out of the room and down the corridor, into the kitchen. I told that horrid old char, who was there, what I'd heard, and she was ever so rude to me. Between you and me, I don't think she liked me coming here to tea. Anyway, ever since she spoke to me as she did, I've never taken any notice of her again until to-day."

"The 'all porter ain't seen your dog, miss."

So engrossed were the pair of them in what they were saying that they had not heard the charwoman enter with

her noiseless tread. Dixon wondered if she had heard what the girl had said, and, if so, how much.

The irresponsible girl, who had forgotten all about her pet in her interest in the conversation, burst out sobbing afresh. "They've stolen him. He's lost! I shall never see my darling Ting again."

"Look here," said Dixon quietly. "Come into the drawing-room with me."

She followed him obediently across the corridor and Dixon, who was by no means anxious that the charwoman should hear what he was going to say, deliberately shut the door. "Stop crying," he said. "I want to speak to you."

Something in his voice arrested her attention. The beautiful girl stopped crying, and stood looking up at him like an obedient child.

"I want you to listen to what I'm going to say to you, and I want you to believe what I'm going to say. I found your pearls for you, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"I'll find your dog."

"How?"

"I don't know how, and I don't know where, but I'll find him for you. I promise you that. Do you believe me?"

The girl caught her breath, but she managed to keep back her tears and whisper: "Yes."

"In return, I want you to do something for me."

The great eyes brightened until they shone like stars. "What is it?"

"When you get back into your own flat, before you do anything else—now mind, *before you do anything else*, or else you'll forget it—I want you to make your aunt sit down and write me a letter asking me to dine with you to-night."

"But we've asked you already."

"Those kind of invitations don't count. I want you to ask your aunt to write me a formal invitation to dine with you to-night."

A roguish look that was perfectly entrancing came into her eyes. "Are you so anxious to meet the Chinese mandarins, or *me*?"

He would have given his head to have said "You," and plunged into a delightful flirtation then and there, but he was not taking any chances. He had not sounded the

depths of his own heart for nothing. Resolves such as he had made lying out there in the sunshine, even in moments of great temptation, hold good. He looked back into those entrancing eyes without the flicker of an eyelash. "I want to meet the Chinese mandarins. You belong to Carew."

"All the same, I'd like a little bit of *you* to belong to *me*."

He shook his head. "My dear child, a man that's worth anything can belong to only one woman. A woman that's worth anything ought to belong to only one man. I'd like to be a Mormon and divide myself up into little bits amongst all you beautiful, bewitching things. But I'm not. I'm just a poor devil of a fellow who's got all his work cut out to live up to what he thinks right." He put out his hands and took hers. "You're a very beautiful woman. Don't stoop to use your beauty to tempt a man from doing his best to keep straight."

The girl, who had never been spoken to in such a way before in all her gay, thoughtless young life, looked up breathlessly at Dixon, and an expression quite different from any expression he had seen there before, crept into her eyes. "I like you for saying that," she said quietly. "I *am* a beastly flirt, and I love to lead men on. But I love Reggie, and I'm glad with all my heart he's got a friend like you. I won't try to flirt with you again. I'd like you to be madly in love with me, but I'll always remember what you've said to me to-day, and even if I *could* get you away from that girl you're engaged to, I wouldn't; so that's straight."

He stooped and kissed her hand. "That's good of you," he said softly.

"I'll go straight back to auntie and make her write that invitation. We dine at eight, and there'll only be us and the old dears. Why are you so anxious to meet them?"

"I can't tell you that."

The girl's face was transfigured by a new thought. "Is there anything up?" she whispered eagerly.

He nodded. "Yes."

"Another adventure?"

He nodded again. "Yes."

"And you want to know something about Chinese mandarins?"

For the third time Dixon nodded. "Yes."

The girl clapped her hands with delight. "Oh, how simply ripping! You see how I'll draw them out! They're dears, but sometimes they just sit and look at me as if they wanted to eat me up, and never open their mouths. But, to-night, you'll see, I'll make 'em talk." She went towards the window and turned impulsively back again. "I don't wonder Reggie likes you," she said, in her quick, enthusiastic way. "You're a dear."

He followed her out on to the balcony, and put his strong young arm round her slender waist and lifted her over on to her own side. "You'll make your aunt write to me, won't you?" he said softly in her ear.

"And you'll find my dog for me, won't you?"

They looked at each other and laughed. Then the girl's beautiful blue eyes filled with tears again. "My darling little Ting, oh! you *will* find him for me, won't you?"

"I will."

"I don't know why *you* should be able to find him any more than anyone else," the girl said slowly, "but I don't feel a bit worried now; although, except Reggie, there's nobody in this world I love so much as my own darling little dog."

"Don't you worry! I'll find him."

The girl flashed him one of her quick glances over her shoulder, and waving her hand ran along the balcony into her own flat.

Dixon returned to the drawing-room and rang the bell. "Let me know when the telephone men return, will you?" he said, when the char answered it. Then he looked at her narrowly. "I suppose you don't know anything about this dog?"

"If I did, I should tell you at once, sir. It's a mystery to me where the little beast 'as got."

"It's a mystery to me, too," he said shortly; "and I don't like mysteries. This one's got to be cleared up. It isn't on the roof and it isn't in the flat. Where *can* it have got to?"

The charwoman shrugged her shoulders. "One of them telephone men must have seen the little thing and snapped it up in his pocket, or p'r'aps it got out through the door and ran downstairs."

"Well, it's no good worrying. I can't bother my head

any more about it. You get back to your work, and let me know when the telephone men come back."

"Very good, sir."

He went and lay out on the balcony again. "It's all of a piece," he said to himself, staring up at the bright blue sky. "I haven't the wits to put the puzzle together, but the pieces are all there. Laundrymen, charwoman, coffin, house in Whitechapel, typist, even down to the little Chinese dog—it's all of a piece."

The question was how to fit all these pieces together. If he was wrong, they were so many meaningless coincidences such as occur every day in real life. If he was right. . . .

"And I *am* right," said Mortimer Dixon, sitting up in his chair. "Coincidences are all very well in their way, but there's more than mere coincidence in this. I'm right, and I'll prove it. I've found the girl, and I'll find the dog, and, what's more, I'll find out the truth at the back of it all before I've done, as sure as I'm alive."

"The telephone men are back again, sir."

He got off the lounge as though he was too weary to move. As a matter of fact, he was so keen that he could hardly contain himself. He asked them to come in as though he did not care whether they did or not.

The men came in.

"The young lady who lives in the flat next to mine has a valuable little Chinese dog of which she is very fond," Dixon said, in his fluent way. "By some mistake, the little creature got on to this balcony and came into my flat. I understand the hall door was shut, but, though we have looked everywhere, we can't find the dog. I wonder if you've chanced to see him?"

"No, sir; we were out on the roof."

"I know that," said Dixon impatiently. "It was probably just at the moment you were coming down that the dog ran into the flat."

"I didn't see anything of it, sir."

"Nor you?" Dixon looked over the superior man's shoulder at his assistant.

"I did hear a little dog barking, now I come to think of it, sir, but I never set eyes on it." The assistant's manner was as excellent in its way as his superior's. Quiet and respectful, with not a trace of servility about either man.

"Well," said Dixon impatiently, "there's nothing more

to be said, but"—he paused and looked sharply from one man to the other—"of course, the matter can't rest here. I saw with my own eyes the dog come into the flat. We've searched the whole place and the dog isn't to be found. You were the only other people in the flat besides myself."

"And your servant, sir," put in the head man respectfully.

Dixon turned his head sharply and considered him again. "And, as you very truly say, my servant. It's obvious that, if the door was shut, the dog couldn't get out by itself. It is equally obvious that, if the dog didn't get out, the dog must be still here. You were out on the roof and you say you didn't see him, so he couldn't have got out there."

The elder man smiled. "If you'll excuse me, sir, in any case, if the dog is a small one, as you say, he couldn't have got up the steps of that ladder, for they were pretty stiff even for us."

"Who said the dog was a small one? I didn't."

There was an imperceptible pause, so imperceptible that it would have escaped a less fine ear than Dixon's.

"You mentioned that the dog was valuable, sir; I suppose I took its size for granted, seeing that most ladies' pet dogs which are valuable are small."

The explanation was plausible enough, but Dixon, though he appeared to accept it, said to himself those men know something about the dog. "As a matter of fact," he said aloud, "the dog was so small he could easily have been concealed in a lady's muff or, for that matter, in a man's coat pocket."

"I daresay, sir"—the man's manner was admirable in its quiet self-control—"but it hasn't been in *my* pocket. I haven't stolen the dog."

The directness of this was too much for Mortimer Dixon.

"I never accused you of stealing it, my good man. Remember that."

"Not in so many words, sir. The thought may have crossed your mind, I think, just the same."

"Under similar circumstances, I've no doubt it would have crossed your mind, too," Dixon admitted, with the utmost frankness.

"I daresay, sir." The man paused and looked Dixon full in the eye. "My name's Brown, sir. Roger Brown. I've been with the National Telephone Co. for the last

sixteen years. My private address is the Laurels, 67 Wynchcomb Road, Putney. If you like to ring up the Company, sir, or make any inquiries about me at my own home, you're at perfect liberty to do so."

"I'm much obliged," said Dixon, with equal suavity. "In the event of my being forced to make any inquiries, I've no doubt that the answers will be as satisfactory as I can wish. And your assistant's name?"

"The same as my own, sir; he's my son."

Mortimer Dixon bit his lip with vexation. This, then, was the explanation of the two men's unaccustomed excellence of address. He wondered how it could have escaped him, so apparent was the resemblance. "Very well, Mr Brown," he said quietly, "I will make a note of your name and, in the event of anything further turning up, I will let you know. I suppose your work here is nearly done?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. It will take us at least a couple of days."

"How's that?"

"It's a new wire we are putting in, sir, and it can't be done under."

"That won't make any difference to my telephone, will it?"

"Only a matter of an hour or two, sir."

"When? To-day or to-morrow?"

"To-morrow or the day after, sir; not to-day, at all events."

"That's all, thank you; good-day."

"Good day, sir, and I hope the young lady will find her little dog."

The two men went out of the room. Mortimer Dixon waited for a moment, then he rang the bell again.

"I'm dining out to-night."

"Very good, sir."

He knew better than to look at that blank countenance for any sign of emotion, but he had also learned that she had not yet mastered the fact that emotion is expressed, not only in the face, but in the hands. He fixed his eyes on her coarse red hands as he spoke. "I'm leaving to-morrow morning, for good."

The face remained like stone, but the hands twitched, and the coarse fingers trembled.

"Do you mean you're not coming back at all, sir?"

Perhaps she was more aware of her weakness than he had judged her to be, for, as she asked the question, she hid her hands underneath her coarse apron.

"Yes; it means you are going to get rid of me for good."

"Mr Carew's not coming back, is 'e, sir?"

"So far as I know, he'll be away another four weeks."

"I wish I'd known before, sir, that you was leaving so soon."

"Why, what difference would it have made?"

"I'd have tried to please you better, sir. Shall I pack your things for you, sir?"

"I wish you would. I loathe packing myself."

"Very good, sir." She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "Wouldn't you be likin' somethink to eat?"

"*I am* a bit peckish, now I come to think of it."

"I'll get you something at once, sir."

Left alone, his eyes unconsciously went to the clock. He was surprised to find it was so late.

It was a pretty clock, elegant in design—a gold bird, holding a crystal ball, set in old paste. Beauty-loving Dixon crossed the room to satisfy himself whether it was a genuine piece, or whether it was merely a modern reproduction of a French antique. It did not need a second glance to satisfy him that it was twentieth-century work.

"I've no doubt they diddled poor old Reggie into paying a fabulous price for this stuff." He took a step backwards, and stood looking up at the centre panel of the overmantel, at the beautiful, *riante* face of the girl next door. "So that dainty little nose of yours thinks this place smells like a grocer's shop, does it!" A thrill of satisfaction ran through him. "And once you heard a cry as of someone in pain. Well, charming and beautiful as you are, there's nothing psychic about *you*. And you've Chinese mandarins to dinner, and one of them gave you a Chinese Chow worth two hundred and fifty pounds. That gives one to think furiously, you beautiful child! Yet no man in his senses could be such a fool as to doubt *you*." His eyes, wandering idly, lighted on the two other women on either side of the mantelpiece, whose exquisite faces looked down from their rococo frames.

On a little gilt nail, on the left-hand side, hung the

little key on the wall. He smiled to himself; it was so characteristic of Carew to have such a key as that gilt. He took it down and looked at it.

It was quite an ordinary little key, of the usual Yale design. Yet Dixon stood touching it and turning it over and over in his hand as if, instead of a little plain mechanical contrivance, testimony to the ingenuity of twentieth-century man, it were a curio worth its weight in gold. For quite five minutes, lost in thought, he must have stood there turning the little key over and over. He had long forgotten that he even held it in his hand. Then, suddenly, he felt a kind of sticky sensation, as though he had dipped his hand accidentally in gum. He looked down on his fingers closely. There was no sign of anything on their spotless surface, but on the palm of one hand there was a trace of moisture not due to perspiration. He examined it more closely. He placed the finger of his other hand delicately down on it, and it adhered to the palm of his hand.

It was white wax.

Somebody had taken an impression of the key.

"And one man stands at the bottom of the stairs while the other carries up the coals. I should like to see the gentleman who stands at the foot of the stairs."

He hung the little key back on its gilt nail and, the charwoman coming in at that moment to lay the table, he sat down and made a thoroughly good meal.

Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would never have touched food in the place again under the circumstances. It never even occurred to Mortimer Dixon that he was doing anything out of the way in satisfying his appetite at his ease. He had come to grips with his enemy and sounded the depths both of her weakness and of her strength. If he thought of her at all in that particular connection it would have been to express his hope that he might in his own house find as good a cook.

"Don't you pack my dress clothes," he said to her as she brought him his coffee after lunch. "You can put those in to-morrow. What's it like out?"

"The sun's hot and the wind's cold, sir."

"Good. Then I sha'n't need a coat."

"Are you going out, sir?"

"Yes, I shall be back to dress." Without another word he took up his hat, went out, and rang up the lift.

"This must be pretty slow work. Don't you ever get a day off?" he inquired, as they began to descend.

"Oh yes, sir. We get an afternoon and evening once a week. They've to give us that in, sir, as a bribe for the work I was tellin' you of, sir; otherwise they wouldn't get no one to stay."

"When is it, your day off?"

"This afternoon, sir. I go off duty at three."

Dixon glanced at his watch; it was a quarter past two.

"Shall I call you a taxi, sir?" The hall porter came hurrying up the basement stairs.

"If you'll be so good." For the first time, Dixon regretted he had told his own man not to wait.

"Sorry to hear Miss Dalrymple has lost her little dog, sir."

"Yes, it's a bad job. I'm going to put in an advertisement for her this afternoon."

The hall porter looked at him gravely. "He's worth a pile of money, ain't he, sir?"

"About two hundred and fifty pounds."

"And he don't take much room neither, as you might say; you could hide him in the palm of your hand." The porter grinned broadly. "The telephone men up at your flat, sir, told me you thought *they'd* stolen the dog."

"Then they thought wrong," said Mortimer Dixon shortly. "I suppose you know them well?"

The man shook his head. "No, sir. They're not the ones that have been here before."

"The elder man seems a good man," said Dixon idly. "I expect they've put him on because it's a nasty job."

"I dessay, sir." The porter ran down the steps and opened the taxicab door. "Better 'ave it shut, sir, after your attack."

"Shut!" cried Dixon. "Do you suppose I'm frightened of air? I'm an invalid," he told the taxicab-driver. "Drive me round the Park, and drive very slow."

"Very good, sir." The man grinned as he surveyed his fare's stalwart proportions, and the taxicab drove off.

As soon as he was round the corner, Dixon leaned forward, let down the window and prodded the man gently with his hand. "Drive me to the nearest post office, will you? I want to telephone."

The man drove him to the central office in Buckingham Palace Road.

"Put me on to the manager of this branch, will you?" he asked the girl.

"Do you mean the supervisor?"

"No, I mean the manager."

The girl turned and whispered to her fellow-clerk, an elderly woman with white hair, who came forward and spoke to Dixon herself.

"Is it private personal business, sir?"

"It is," said Dixon, and his sunny smile shone out at her.

"But I've no objection to it going through you."

The woman smiled, more pleased than she cared to show.

"There's no need for that, sir. As it happens, the manager is here to-day. If you will wait a minute, I'll find out if he can see you."

In another minute she beckoned to Dixon, who passed round the counter into an office, by an inner door. "I won't detain you one minute. My name's Mortimer Dixon. I'm a journalist. I'm staying at a friend's flat in Dashley Gardens. His telephone number is 2457." In a few clear words he told him about the dog.

"Did you ask the names of the telephone men who were on the premises?"

Dixon told him what the man had said.

At the mention of the name, Roger Brown, the manager's face cleared. "If the Browns are on your job, sir, they've had nothing to do with your dog. They're two of the best men in our employment. The son has been with us eight, and the father sixteen, years."

"They're O.K., then! Good! Of course, you understand, I wanted to find out who they were before communicating with the police."

"I quite understand, sir. I think you said your number was 2457."

"Yes. I am much obliged to you."

"Not at all, Mr Dixon; pleased to be of service to you."

Dixon went out to his cab. "Trundle me up to 107 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square," he said to the chauffeur.

The traffic was unusually clear. In less than five minutes he was admitted by the solemn-looking butler, who told him his master was disengaged.

In another minute the doctor came in. He was a man of commanding presence, whose beard and hair were almost grey.

"I don't think you've come to me as a patient?" he said, looking Dixon up and down.

Dixon smiled. "No, sir. There's nothing the matter with me. My name's Mortimer Dixon. I'm a journalist. I want to ask you two questions, if you'll be so kind as to give me two minutes."

The great man looked at his watch. "You can sit down for the two minutes," he said dryly. "What is it you want to ask?"

"I'm staying at Dashley Gardens, my friend Reginald Carew's flat." He stopped short and looked at the doctor.

The doctor stared back at him.

"He doesn't know a blooming thing about it!" Mortimer Dixon said to himself triumphantly. Aloud, with the utmost deference, he said: "Reginald Carew, sir. You've been attending him, I think?"

"I've never heard the name before."

Dixon rose to his feet with the graceful alertness that was part and parcel of the man. "I've been misinformed, sir; I understood that you had been attending Mr Carew. Accept my very sincere apologies." He turned as if to go to the door.

But the doctor stopped him. "One moment. I think you said there were two questions you wanted to ask me. The two minutes isn't up yet. What's the second?"

Dixon smiled at the old man. "The two questions hung together, sir. I've, inadvertently, been poisoned up at Carew's flat three days ago, by Mr Carew's cook, and had a pretty close shave of my life. I understood you had attended Carew when he was ill, and I thought that, without doubting the cook's good faith for one moment, I would ask you what it was my friend was suffering from when he sent for you."

"What was your cook doing with opium in the house?" His keen eyes fixed themselves on Dixon's ingenuous countenance as though they were a magnet which could draw the truth out of the greatest Ananias that ever lived.

"Opium, sir?" For once in his life Dixon was taken aback.

"You don't drink; you don't drug. Your skin is slightly sallow. Your nose just round the top is a trifle pinched. There's a dilation of the pupil of the eye. There's a bluish tinge, almost imperceptible, around the mouth. I notice,

too, a distinct tendency to tremble at the corner of the lips. Wasn't it opium?"

"It was." The diagnosis was so unexpected, so clear, that Dixon, who loved competence in another man as much as he loved it in himself, could have fallen on the old man's neck.

The great man said slowly: "I know nothing of your friend Mr Carew, but if I were he, and he had the same symptoms as you have, when *he* was ill and had to call in a medical man, I should certainly advise him to change his cook." He pulled out his watch and sighed. "Two minutes and a half. It's that extra half-minute that spoils my whole day. Sorry I couldn't answer both your questions." He nodded his head abruptly and walked straight out of the room, leaving Dixon transfixed with delight and excitement.

"Take me to the nearest telegraph office as quickly as you can." The taxi whirled off into Oxford Street, and drew up outside a first-class grocer's shop.

Dixon went in and sent a prepaid telegram to Carew. On his way out he stopped at the counter and asked for a couple of pounds of all sorts of spices. "Put in everything that you've got in the way of spices," he told the young shopman. Then he noticed the surprise in the young shopman's face. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir, but it's an unusual order, two pounds of all sorts of spices."

"Never you mind about that," said Dixon briefly, "just you give it to me, my young friend, and mind you put in every kind of spice you've got."

He paid his money, picked up the parcel, and drove home, and went straight to the telephone. After a moment's delay, the soft voice he loved fell sweetly on his ear.

"I want you to take down this number, darling." He gave it to her. "Got it? Good . . . I want you to keep it and ring me up at ten to-morrow night."

"Sha'n't I see you before then, Morty?"

"No, love; it's impossible. I'm just finishing my work. After that, we'll have a good holiday together wherever you like. I expect to have finished by this time to-morrow, but, in case you don't hear from me, remember my number is 2457 Gerrard, and at ten o'clock to-morrow night ring me up."

"And if I don't get any answer?"

"You go on ringing till you do."

"You're sure you're quite well?"

"Fit as a fiddle. Did you get your roses this morning? Were they nice?"

"Lovely."

"I'm dining out to-night, and to-morrow I shall have to work all day. Till to-morrow at ten sharp then, unless I ring you up before. Are you well?"

"Quite."

"Have you been out?"

"Twice."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Like a top."

"Have you eaten properly?"

"Of course."

"Have you thought of me?"

She laughed.

"All the day?"

"All the day."

"Every minute?"

"Every minute."

"Do you love me as much as you used to."

"Oh, Morty."

"Angel! Good-night." He rang off and went back into the drawing-room.

There was a handsome gilt box, evidently intended for cards, standing on the side table. It was empty. Dixon opened the paper parcel he had got at the grocer's and poured the spice in.

"We shall see what kind of stink *you* make," he said, looking at the nutmegs, and cloves, and peppercorns, and cinnamon, as they poured in a black torrent into the box. He shut it with a bang and went outside.

The pretty girl, watching from the drawing-room window of the adjoining flat, came out too. In her hand she held an envelope. "This is your formal invitation to dinner," she said gaily. Waving the envelope in her hand, she ran forward to the dividing line.

"My aunt's compliments and mine, sir, and we shall be pleased to see you." She dropped a curtsy as he took the letter out of her hand.

It was not often that Dixon's aplomb deserted him, but

as he grasped the dainty missive, mechanically, he had no gay answer ready for her. His blue eyes were fixed in an intent gaze on her dainty white blouse.

"What on earth are you staring at?" she demanded, following the direction of his eyes.

"Your blouse."

"My blouse? Is there anything the matter with it?"

"Where did you get that blouse?" he demanded.

"You extraordinary person! It was made for me at Harrod's. Why?"

"Has it ever been washed?"

"Yes. Why on earth do you ask?"

Dixon bent his tall head so that his eyes were on a level with the girl's. "Do you know who washes your blouses?"

The girl backed away from him in her surprise. "Have you gone mad?"

"For God's sake, answer me," he said earnestly. "Tell me, do you know who last washed that blouse?"

The girl went into peals of laughter. "Oh, you delightful, extraordinary creature!" she gasped. "You're quite as extraordinary as Reginald said. What on earth will you ask next?"

"You haven't answered me yet."

The girl looked at him. There was no mistaking the earnest sincerity of his glance.

"My dear lunatic, if you want to know, you'd better ask your old charwoman. She knows some wonderful laundry down in Whitechapel, where they do them up in the most wonderful way. Anything that auntie or I want done especially nicely, we give to her. She takes them away and she brings them back." Her pretty mutinous glance ran over him. "Are you thinking of setting up a laundry, or are you a maniac, like Reggie, about your shirts?"

"I'm a maniac," said Mortimer Dixon quietly, "but not such a maniac as not to see how well that particular blouse suits you."

In the midst of her smiles the girl's charming eyes clouded over again. "It's too bad that Ting should have got lost this morning," she declared. "Everything's so beautiful: the weather, and coming home, and such a lovely invitation for to-morrow! Reggie's coming up on Wednesday, and my new dress fits to perfection, and then there's meeting you, and those two old dears coming to-night—they're sure

to bring me something delightful ; they always do—and it's all spoilt because my dear darling's lost. I should be crying my eyes out now if it were not for you. You *will* find him for me, won't you ? ”

“ Don't you worry, I'll find him.” He glanced at the letter in his hand. “ Will your aunt be expecting a formal letter, or will a message do ? ”

“ I think, under the circumstances, a message will do. Till to-night, then, and if that beast of an old char of yours won't take your linen down to Whitechapel I'll find out the address.” The beautiful and inconsequent girl skipped away down the balcony, and disappeared into her own flat.

Mortimer Dixon stood on the balcony, and held on with both hands to the rail at the top, for the chimney pots seemed to him to be dancing up and down. Here was another link towards the completion of the chain which he was forging.

The blouse the girl was wearing was an exact counterpart of the blouse he had seen the Chinaman starching in the cellar underground.

Though it may seem strange that a man should know one blouse from another, Mortimer Dixon had, at one time in his life, been advertising agent to a ladies' outfitting shop in Bond Street. During those six months, not a garment used by fashionable women had escaped his attention. He had gone in for petticoats and silk stockings, with the same ardour he threw into everything else and, at the end of his time, he had come out with a knowledge of women's clothing, that many a man, destined to pass his whole life in the trade, would have given his head to have.

The minute he set eyes on that blouse he recognised its make : the queer zigzag frill, with the curiously patterned Irish lace edging, and the twirly little blue buttons placed at intervals down the back of the sleeve. It had Paris written all over it. Though it might be counterfeited in half-a-dozen shops in London, the girl's own words would have confirmed him in his instant suspicion, had there been room in his mind (which there was not) for the slightest doubt.

“ This is more than mere coincidence,” he repeated. “ That kind of thing is all very well in a story, but this is real life. I'll give 'em another twenty-four hours and I'll have 'em—as surely and as easily as a fowler snares a bird.”

The excitement and the elation were too much for him. He suddenly felt exhausted, and very weak. Without an effort he dismissed the whole thing from his mind, lay down on the lounge, and went fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXXII

PUNCTUALLY at eight o'clock that evening Mortimer Dixon presented himself at the flat. In his immaculate linen and his well-fitting clothes, as he entered the pretty drawing-room, he looked an uncommonly desirable young man.

There was no one in the room when he was ushered in. The maid apologised for her mistresses' absence and said that they had come back late from their drive. He begged the girl to ask them not to hurry. As a matter of fact, he was only too glad of a chance to sit down, and let his impressions sink in.

The room was a charming one—as luxuriously furnished, but with far more “atmosphere,” than the same room in his own flat. It was full of those dainty touches which, to the observant, give the clue to the owner's character long before the owner appears. It was charmingly furnished in pale blue, and he noted with artistic satisfaction the exquisite toning of the furniture and the drapery, and the controlled profusion of flowers. The sun was setting, and the room was flooded with an amber glow of golden light. The impulse to look at the sky was irresistible. He got out of his chair, went to the balcony, and looked out.

It is almost as strange to look at one's own house from another point of view as it is to see two different sides of a human face. The angle of his neighbours' flat was so totally different from that of his own that, he told himself, were he to go to the end of the balcony, where the block of flats stopped, he would be facing the four last windows of his own. As he stood there in the sunlight, idly speculating on the caprice of the architect's design, the door opened and the girl's aunt came in.

She joined him on the balcony, and he pointed out to her the peculiarity which had just invited his eyes.

“We noticed the same thing ourselves as soon as we took it. Mr Carew tells us that the reason had something to do with a flaw in the ground contract. They found they had

a shortage of several feet when they came to build, which threw the entire thing out. Luckily, we have Mr Carew for a neighbour, for, really, if it were strangers, we couldn't have stood it. If the lights are up, and the windows open, it's almost as if we were in the same flat."

"Indeed?" said Mortimer Dixon politely. You'd have thought, if you had heard him, that he was just an ordinary young man making pleasant conversation with a charming elderly woman while he was waiting for the guests of his own age to arrive. In reality, he was listening with an eagerness he found it difficult to hide.

"I remember one night in particular," Mrs Dalrymple went on, "when that dreadful child of mine called me in from my bedroom to look at Mr Carew brushing his hair. The blind was down, but we could see every movement of his hands in front of the glass, as if we were in the room."

"But Carew's bedroom is on the other side of the flat," he said quickly; "it's the spare bedroom that is next to the drawing-room."

"That's queer," said Mrs Dalrymple. "I can't have made a mistake, for Peggy dragged me in here to see it."

"Perhaps he had a friend staying with him?"

Mrs Dalrymple shook her head. "No; I distinctly remember Peggy chaffing him about it the next day, and the two of them quarrelling over it. She declared it was not his shadow on the blind, but a woman's. She would have it she distinctly saw her brush her long hair."

Carew's passion for women suddenly occurred to Mortimer Dixon, and he dropped the subject as if it were hot coal, fearing some indiscreet revelation about his friend. He confined himself to pleasing inanities until the door opened and Margaret Dalrymple came in.

To say she looked beautiful is to say very little. It is a truism that most women, young and old, generally look their best in evening dress, but the sight of the charming girl in her finery positively took Dixon's breath away.

Her golden head was dressed with an almost classical simplicity, in simply falling curls. Her dress was white, of a diaphanous material which gave to her beauty so etherealised a grace that it seemed to the young man, watching her, as if she floated rather than walked into the room. At her slender waist she wore three pale pink roses. Round her exquisite white neck she wore her strings of pearls.

The very perfection of English girlhood, with her dazzling complexion and her brilliant eyes, very well aware of the effect she was making, though outwardly perfectly unself-conscious, she sailed across the room.

"Your new dress, my dear?" Her aunt lifted her gold eyeglasses to her eyes in surprise. "What an extravagant child you are!"

"It isn't for *you*, darling; and it isn't for *you*"—she curtsied with the most lovely impertinence to Dixon—"it's for those old dears of mine! Just you wait till you see them!" she exclaimed, turning to Dixon. "I tell Reggie I shall send him to them to take lessons in how to make love to me. Aunty won't believe me when I tell her that they make the most frantic love to me, but they do!"

"Be quiet, child. There's the bell." Mrs Dalrymple went into the drawing-room to receive her guests.

"Do you like my frock?" the beautiful girl said to Dixon, looking up at him roguishly.

"I couldn't have designed a better one myself."

"Perhaps you'd like my dressmaker's address too?" she whispered audaciously behind her fan.

A perfume, pungent and alluring, suddenly assailed Dixon's senses. It was the smell he knew so well, and hated so thoroughly. "What's that scent you've got on?" he said sharply.

"More questions! It's my fan, I expect." Margaret Dalrymple held out the dainty little trifle towards him. It was exquisite—a marvel of intricate workmanship in cedar-wood; the hearts of the flowers carried out in small, uncut rubies and seed pearls. "Isn't that the smell you mean?"

He nodded. "Where did you get that fan?"

"One of my old dears gave it to me. I only use it when they come. They give me the most lovely things."

"Then you oughtn't to accept them," he said sternly.

"Why ever not?" Then she began to laugh. "You're surely not one of those old sillies like my old lunatic of a grandfather who believes in the Yellow Peril, are you?"

But Dixon did not laugh back. "It's not the Yellow Peril I believe in; it's the White."

She bent forward to make some laughing rejoinder when the drawing-room door opened, and the maid ushered the two guests in.

They were both Chinamen.

They were both tall men.

They were both in native dress.

They were both commanding figures and would have arrested instant attention in any assembly, but Dixon had only eyes for one.

Not his gorgeous petticoat of amber silk, nor his tunic of peacock-blue, so richly embroidered with gold that it was as stiff as if it were a board. Not his yellow cap with blazing diamond pin, holding in its place the peacock's feather, which, in its simplicity, showed the dazzling height of his rank. Not the commanding presence, the fragile hands loaded with barbaric rings, nor the brilliant eye with its look of pride. At none of those things did he give even a glance. His eyes fixed themselves on the round patch of black sticking-plaster which lay on the saffron cheek like a blot of ink.

Well for Mortimer Dixon that he had not come face to face with this man without warning. The last time they had met was in the moonlight, in the shadows of a Whitechapel road. The last time he had seen that face, it was distorted with rage. The last time he had heard that suave voice, it was uttering curses on his head.

Here was the climax of the mystery with a vengeance ! The man who had run that terrible race with him in the night, who had penetrated the disguise of the pigtail, and plucked it from off his head ; the man who would carry the mark of the girl's scissors to his grave, was the man who, with extended hand, was suavely greeting the gratified Englishwoman inside the room.

The stress and the strain of those terrible hours had left their traces on the young journalist. His nerves were all on edge. His heart was in his mouth. His head was going round and round. But Mortimer Dixon was not to be outdone in pride, or in purpose, by another man, even though that other man, in his own land, were a reigning prince.

It was a very elegant and composed man of the world, with gallant bearing and well-poised head, who came forward at his hostess's call and bowed as she introduced her guests.

For an instant the two men looked at each other. The recognition was mutual and instant. The Chinaman, in spite of his seemingly gratified murmuring at the unconscious indignity put upon him, would have given all he possessed to strike that handsome young countenance into

the dust ! It seemed to Mortimer Dixon, contrasting that raging apparition falling back before the scissors, and this splendid personage with his peacock's plumes, that he would have given all he possessed to be able to laugh.

The two men looked at each other ; they bowed in silence.

Mrs Dalrymple laid her hand on the Chinaman's arm and, with the ease of a woman well used to little contretemps, explained over her shoulder that they had been disappointed in one guest, so, partnerless, Dixon, found himself following—odd man out—on the heels of the four others as they went into the next room.

The dining-room was furnished with the same elegant simplicity as the drawing-room. The appointments of the table and the decorations were superb. The glass was of the finest cut-crystal. The plate, magnificent in its solidity, carried on each piece the head of the first King George.

"It's my grandfather's silver, so, for goodness sake, take care not to scratch it!" the beautiful girl whispered to Dixon as they sat down. She grimaced at him again behind her fan. "It's part of the stupid old family legend, the same as my pearls!"

"I ought to have asked you before if they were hurt at all," he returned.

"One was cracked. I had them restrung, and put that one at the back by the clasp. I'll show you after dinner." She turned her graceful head, and gave her entire attention to the Chinaman at her side.

It was just the kind of piquant situation Mortimer Dixon loved. Here he sat at table with two women, to one of whom he had rendered a service none the less substantial because of its romance. The other he hardly knew from Adam, and yet, here he was their guest, dining with them on the most apparently intimate terms.

Within arm's length of him, on either side, sat two men who, though he had never spoken to them and had never done them any harm, were, nevertheless, his enemies—and enemies of the deadliest kind. To say the least of it, the situation was full of possibilities, and he enjoyed them to the full.

It pleased the great man to reserve all his looks for the young beauty beside him, and all his conversation for the young man. With an urbanity which was quite superb in its apparent simplicity, he directed his conversation to

Mortimer, drawing him out, leading him on, giving him opportunity after opportunity for displaying to the best possible advantage whatever conversational gifts he had.

Dixon seconded him ably. Not a subject was touched upon that he had not something to say about it—and not only did he say it, but he said it quickly, and he said it well. Not a topic came under notice that he had not read of, even if he had not a first-hand knowledge of it. With a tact that Dixon recognised as the highest form of breeding, the Chinaman avoided the one subject on which he would have found himself at a disadvantage—travelling; it never came on the tapis at all.

The newest play; the newest singer; the Russian dancers; the private view of the newly discovered artist, each one, in turn, came up without any apparent effort, was touched on and dismissed.

Dixon, by reason of his calling, was, of course, at home in them all. In some strange way the two men seemed to supplement each other. Their point of view was totally opposed; they were separated not only by nationality, by creed, race, thought, by heredity and instinct but by years. Yet, to hear them talking, one would have thought at one moment that they were the most sympathetic of strangers and, at the next, the most intimate of friends.

The atmosphere was positively electrical. The talk, at first general, came and went between the two men until it became a duologue. The other three, well contented to hold their tongues, sat and listened, so well worth listening to was it. The elder man's mordant wit and scathing sarcasm seemed purposely designed to serve as a background for the younger man's infectious gaiety and brilliant charm.

As for the meal itself, as far as the palate was concerned, had Mortimer Dixon been asked his opinion when they rose from table he would have said, and with truth, that it was the most successful dinner he had ever enjoyed. The glittering glass, the beautiful roses; the elegant lampshades casting golden pools of light on the scarlet strawberries and the black grapes; the clinking of the ice in the pail, the frothing of the wine in the glasses; the gorgeous costumes of the men, the exquisite simplicity of the beautiful girl; the luxurious room, the silent-footed, quick-handed maids; and, above and beyond all, that secret knowledge of what lay beneath this sparkling surface, stimulated him in the

most extraordinary way. That same elation which had seized him in the presence of danger in the dirty cellar gripped him with tenfold force as he sat back in his chair and ate his asparagus and sipped his champagne.

Reviewing it afterwards for the benefit of the Plump Little Party—that simple little soul sewing her white frocks in the little back garden in Brixton—he told her he felt ready for anything.

“If he'd fallen at my feet and offered me a kingdom I shouldn't have been surprised,” he told her in his own exaggerated, delightful way, “and, if he'd taken up the carving knife and stuck it into me, I shouldn't have been surprised either; I shouldn't have cared a damn. I felt as I felt when I heard the coffin snap to the other night, and knew I couldn't get out. I felt as I felt when I saw the taxi waiting in the moonlight and that beast fall back before us; and I felt as I think I shall feel when my last great adventure comes to an end, and I plunge into the fathomless sea of Death, and find out what lies on the other side.”

Meantime, the dinner drew to an end.

According to her established custom, Mrs Dalrymple had no idea of leaving the men behind at the table, and when she rose, the whole party followed her into the next room.

CHAPTER XXXIII

It was not until they were drinking their coffee in the drawing-room that the beautiful girl flashed her brilliant glance at the Chinaman beside her, and told him she had lost her Chow.

“When I heard he couldn't be found,” she declared, “I nearly cried myself blind.”

“Not all the dogs in China are worth a single tear from your eyes,” the Chinaman answered her, “except *one*.”

“What one's that?”

“The sacred dog of Confucius.”

“And why shouldn't I cry for *him*?”

“It is a magic dog—a talisman. The one who possesses him is so happy that he forgets how to shed tears.”

Margaret Dalrymple clapped her hands like a child. “How perfectly heavenly! What's the dog like?”

"It is made of green jade—the lucky stone—and has one ruby and two diamond eyes."

"Why has it three eyes?"

"So that it may look at the past, the present and the future. It can tell what has been, what is and what is to come."

"A fortune-telling dog!" The spoilt beauty, cup in hand, crossed the room. "How heavenly! Tell me more. How does it tell your fortune? Does it talk?" The light through the rose-coloured shades fell on the girl's beautiful, eager face. Dixon thought to himself that more than ever she looked just like an exquisite child.

"You hold it in your hand, and you think of what you want to know, and you look into its eyes, and it answers you."

"It doesn't!"

"It does."

The girl set her coffee-cup down on the mantelpiece and came still nearer. "Have you ever seen it?"

"Yes."

"Did it tell *your* fortune?"

"Yes."

"Did it come true?"

"Yes."

She clapped her hands. "How perfectly angelic! I simply love having my fortune told. I believe in it, you know! I once had my fortune told by somebody at a bazaar and it was quite wonderful. She told me all kinds of wonderful things, didn't she, aunty? But, afterwards"—the corners of her mouth went down—"we found out it was one of our own friends dressed up, so that it didn't count. All the same, I *do* believe that some people can tell fortunes, don't *you*?" She bent forward, her face alight again. "Tell me some more about this Sacred Dog. I suppose it's hidden away in some stuffy old temple in China."

"No."

"Then, I suppose, it belongs to the Emperor?"

"No."

"Then whom *does* it belong to?"

"Me."

"*You*?" She sat down on the sofa by the side of the Chinaman.

"It has been in my family for hundreds of years."

"Where is it now?"

“ At home.”

“ In China ? ”

“ At home, here.”

“ What, here, in London ? ”

“ Certainly.”

“ In St James’s Street ? ”

“ Would you like to see it ? ”

“ I’d give the eyes out of my head to see it.”

“ That is very easy. If you will get your charming aunt to bring you to my house to tea, the Sacred Dog shall answer you what you will.”

“ How perfectly enchanting ! ” In her naive delight she slipped her hand through the Chinaman’s arm, and looked up into his face with the frank delight of a fascinated child.

Mortimer Dixon, watching the little interlude across the room, went hot and cold all over. It was as though a veil which had hidden a hideous thing from him was being lifted before his very eyes.

So this was how the Chinese conducted their wooing !

Knowing what he knew, it took him all his time to stand still, sipping his coffee, and not fling himself across the room, and tear the exquisite, unconscious girl from the contaminating touch of that gorgeous arm.

“ When can I come ? ”

“ Whenever you will.”

“ Then, to-morrow.” She turned to the elegant woman lounging at her ease in a low chair. “ Aunty, when will you take me to St James’s Street to have my fortune told ? ”

“ Silly child ! I don’t believe in any such nonsense.”

“ But *I* do. Will you take me to-morrow ? ”

“ To-morrow you’re going to Hurlingham.”

“ Then the day after ? ”

“ The day after is the Cholmondeleys’ garden-party.”

“ Bother the garden-party ! ” She turned eagerly to the Chinaman. “ Can’t you bring the dog here ? ”

He shook his head. “ I fear you must come to me.”

“ Well, then, next Wednesday—will you take me next Wednesday, aunty ? I *must* have my fortune told.”

“ Very well,” Mrs Dalrymple smiled indulgently. “ Make it Wednesday, if you like.”

“ Then Wednesday. How *heavenly* ! ” A sudden thought seemed to strike her. She turned her head sharply and

looked round the room. "Mr Dixon," she called out, "where are you?"

Mortimer Dixon advanced from the window where he stood.

"Did you hear what his Excellency was saying about the Sacred Dog?"

"I heard," said he dryly.

"Mr Dixon has good ears," said the Chinaman softly.

"And good eyes," returned Mortimer Dixon, looking full at the black patch on the saffron cheek.

"You are to be envied, Mr Dixon."

"Why," interposed Margaret Dalrymple, "haven't you got good ears and eyes?"

"I have only one thing," said the Chinaman slowly—"a good memory."

"So have I," returned Dixon blandly.

The excited girl clapped her hands, laughing as gaily as a child. "I have an atrocious memory usually, but I sha'n't forget *Wednesday*! Just fancy," she turned her dazzling blue eyes on Dixon, "a Sacred Dog made of green jade, with diamond and ruby eyes!" She thrust her hand, a second time, through the Chinaman's arm. "What a delightful person you are!" she cried. "You're always different from anybody else!" She put out her other hand and patted the seat of the chair she had just vacated. "You come and sit down here, too, Mr Dixon, then I shall be hedged about with mystery and cleverness." She flashed a look at the inscrutable face on her left. "You two ought to be great friends," she said, in her pretty way. "Mr Dixon is wonderful too. All kinds of wonderful things happen to him. He finds out all kinds of wonderful things." She nodded her pretty head at Mortimer. "He ought really to have been a detective. He finds out everything about everybody, no matter how difficult. He's going to find out who stole my Chow."

"That will, indeed, be wonderful," the Chinaman said suavely. "If the little dog ran into Mr Dixon's flat, perhaps Mr Dixon can tell us where he is *now*?" Something in the mockery underlying that urbane smile touched Mortimer Dixon on the raw.

"Perhaps your Excellency could suggest where I should look?" he remarked boldly.

"It was most *extraordinary*," Margaret Dalrymple cried

excitedly. "He was just at my feet; he ran along the balcony, squeezed himself through the rail, and went in through the French window. He hadn't been gone a minute before Mr Dixon went after him, yet he couldn't be found." The ready tears sprang to her deep blue eyes, where they trembled until they looked like violets drenched in dew. "I sha'n't sleep a wink to-night for thinking of my darling."

"I will send you another one to-morrow morning, if you will permit."

"That wouldn't be the same thing. I want my own darling Chow."

"Mr Dixon will find him for you," said the Chinaman.

"If I don't," responded Dixon, "you can consult the Sacred Dog." The eyes of the two men met like a challenge of swords over the bent head of the beautiful girl. "I'll find him for you," said Mortimer Dixon, "don't you cry."

"I'm *not* crying!" Margaret Dalrymple put up the cedar fan, which lay in her lap, to hide her face. Then in her quick, impetuous way she turned to Dixon. "Ah, there now, at last I've found out what that smell is like!" She furled the fan and held it out to him. "Smell that." Dixon bent his head and the scent of the cedarwood floated up to him. "Isn't it exactly the same?"

"Exactly."

"Isn't it extraordinary?" With great animation she turned to the Chinaman, who was watching them both with his passionless, dull black eyes. "Such a queer thing, in Mr Carew's flat, the one next here, where Mr Dixon is living now—there's a most extraordinary smell there. Not all over the flat, only here and there."

"What kind of a smell?"

"Just like this." She unfurled the fan and held it out to the Chinaman. "This darling little fan that you gave me, you remember? Well, that's just how it smells. A cedar-woody, spicy, aromatic kind of a smell, and nobody but he and I can smell it. *We* can, can't we?" She turned to Dixon, who nodded. "Yet we can't make out what it is; isn't it queer?"

"Very queer."

Dixon's fine ear detected a change in the bland voice. He lifted his eyes and caught a look that seemed to him to lay bare the very secrets of the Chinaman's soul. The dull eyes

blazed into fire. The voice was high and shrill. Despite his magnificent self-control, the frail hands—hands which reminded him closely of other hands he had once seen—trembled under their weight of gorgeous gems. Even as Dixon looked, it had gone, and the picturesque head was bent over the fan in the girl's hand. "It smells like this, you say?"

"Exactly."

"Then it is another mystery for Mr Dixon to find out. It should be easy, if he can do such wonderful things." He rose as he spoke and stood looking down at the elegant figure beside him—the girl had risen too.

"Oh, you're not going yet, are you!" she cried, in dismay. "You haven't told me any story to-night."

"No; I've heard one instead."

The exquisite face took on a puzzled look. "I haven't told you a story!"

The Chinaman smiled. "You come to me on Wednesday, and the Sacred Dog with his diamond eyes will tell you a beautiful story—a fairy story for a fairy princess." He took her hand and bent his lips to it in his courtly, exotic way. "If he tells you one thing that is not happiness I will tear out his diamond eyes." He spoke the last words in a whisper, but Dixon caught them. He clenched his hand behind him for fear lest he should strike the words from off those murmuring lips.

The Chinaman's exit was like his entrance. His adieux, courtly and graceful, were made in the twinkling of an eye. He bent over his hostess' hand, then, on his way to the door, bowed to Dixon, and looked him in the eye. "I have been most entertained," he said, in his perfect English, which sounded so strangely, spoken by the foreign voice. "We shall doubtless meet again."

Dixon gave him back look for look. "I have no doubt we shall, Excellency."

"Don't be *too* wonderful, Mr Dixon," the mocking voice went on softly. "It is one thing to put your head into the lion's mouth, but it is another to try to bite off the lion's head." With that he took his leave—a picturesque and courtly presence—his enraptured hostess accompanying him and his companion to the door.

As the door shut, Dixon turned to the young girl. With heightened colour and downcast eyes she was rubbing her

delicate handkerchief, which she had rolled into a ball, vigorously on the back of her hand. "Have you hurt your hand?" Dixon asked her.

She stamped her little foot, and her cheeks flamed. "I wish to goodness he wouldn't kiss me," she exclaimed. "He's an old dear, and frightfully amusing, but I draw the line at his kissing my hands!" She scrubbed more vigorously than ever, until the back of her delicate hand was a bright red. "I wonder if it's true about the dog?"

"Of course it isn't?"

"Jade is a lucky stone, you know. I wonder if the diamond eyes are big?" Her own grew big at the thought. "I wish he'd give it to me."

"Don't you take it, if he does."

The door opened and Mrs Dalrymple came in, holding a small parcel in her hand. "Well, he's gone," she said placidly. "What a successful evening we've had! That's partly thanks to you, Mr Dixon. I quite enjoyed hearing you two talk." She turned to her niece with a cry of dismay. "What on earth are you rubbing your hand like that for, child?"

"I hate my hand being kissed."

"Silly child!" said her aunt reprovingly. "He doesn't mean anything by it. It's only their foreign way. I think you're very ungrateful, seeing how charming the prince is to you." She held out the little box. "He asked me to give you this."

"What is it?" The girl snapped it excitedly from her aunt's hand and opened it. Inside there lay a tiny ring set with a huge diamond. Dixon thought, as it lay sparkling up at them from its white velvet bed, that it looked like the evil eye!

"Auntie! it's a *diamond!*" Margaret Dalrymple pounced on it excitedly and held it up to the light.

"My dear child, it *can't* be a diamond! It must be a yellow topaz."

"It *isn't!* It's a *diamond!* Just look!" She slipped her finger through it, and flashed it to and fro in a transport of delight. "Don't you think it's a diamond." She thrust her hand out at Dixon.

"Yes, I do."

"Goodness me, you lucky girl!" Mrs Dalrymple stared at the great jewel through her gold lorgnette. "The man

must be a millionaire to give a child of your age things like that."

"He's a *darling*," said her niece; then she looked at her hand. "I'm an ungrateful wretch, that's what I am." She looked at the beautiful ring, and the light faded out of her face. "All the same," she declared, "I don't like my hand being kissed!" She slipped the finger out of the ring and put it back in the box. "I'm not sure that I shall keep it after all."

"My dear girl, why-ever not?" So amazed was her aunt that her lorgnette fell out of her hand.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "It's too expensive," she said shortly. "Besides, I don't think Reggie would like me to take such things."

Mrs Dalrymple shrugged her elegant shoulders. "Oh, my dear child, Reggie—— If you're going to talk like that——"

"I'm not going to talk like anything; I'm going to bed." She held out her hand to Dixon. "Good-night, you wonderful person! Promise me, if you hear anything about my darling little Chow, you'll come and tell me at once!"

"At once."

"Even if it's in the middle of the night?"

"Even if it's in the middle of the night," said he, laughing.

"Swear!"

"Swear!"

Margaret Dalrymple turned to her aunt. "Undo the clasp of my necklace, will you, darling? Danby has gone to bed." She turned with it in her hand and showed it to Dixon. "There's the pearl that was scratched. See? It's got a teeny wee hole in it. If grandpapa had seen it he'd have gone mad."

"It's a pity," said Dixon, turning the necklace in his hand. "They're certainly exquisite pearls."

"I simply adore them. But, then, I adore all jewels." She put her hand out and began fingering the Chinaman's ring again, as though she couldn't resist it. "It's like a great yellow eye flashing up at you, isn't it?"

"The evil eye," said Dixon quietly.

With a little sigh the girl slipped her finger out of the ring again. "I want it most frightfully," she said, with her usual engaging frankness, "but I don't think I shall keep it." She gave a little heartrending sigh. "Oh dear! how I wish

poor darling Reggie were a millionaire!" She bent her cool young cheek to her aunt's kiss. "Good-night, darling; take care of the ring for me. Good-night, Mr Dixon. When I see Ting's darling little blue satin basket waiting for him, I'm sure I sha'n't sleep a wink."

Dixon went forward and opened the door for her. As he did so, she looked up in his face.

"Now, remember," she called out gaily, "it doesn't matter what time it is, if you hear anything about Ting, come and tell me. I sha'n't be asleep, and if I am, it doesn't matter. My room's next to this, and opens out on to the balcony. Knock at the window, and I shall wake in a second. Good-night, both of you."

With her golden hair, her flushed cheeks, her dazzling blue eyes, and her white chiffon draperies, she floated out of the room. Dixon found it almost a tragedy to shut the door on such a lovely vision of joy and inconsequent youth.

"She looked well to-night, didn't she?" said Mrs Dalrymple, who was watching him.

"Exquisite," he said simply. "I think she's the most beautiful child I've ever seen."

"Child? She's nineteen."

"If she were ninety, it wouldn't make any difference. She'll be a child to the end of her life. Indeed, I think that exquisite irresponsibility of hers is probably her greatest charm."

"She ought to make a good match." Like her niece before her, Mrs Dalrymple bent over the table, slipping her finger through the diamond ring. "It's a wonderful stone, isn't it? I wonder how much it's worth!" She turned it round and round on her finger. "Isn't he a charming man? So accomplished! He can speak five languages to perfection. Such wonderful manners, and so rich!"

"I'm not by way of being wildly enamoured of Orientals myself. One's never sure of them."

"Oh, I'm perfectly sure of these Chinamen. They were introduced to us in Paris, at the house of one of the oldest families in France." With the same little sigh of regret that her niece had given before her, she slipped her finger out of the ring.

"Poor man!" she said, laughing softly. "It was a case of love at first sight! They used to call him her

'shadow' in Paris. No matter where we went, he was sure to turn up."

"Good God!" cried Dixon, startled. "You wouldn't dream of letting him marry her?"

Mrs Dalrymple shrugged her elegant shoulders. "Think of the position she'd have. These international marriages make themselves every day."

"But a Chinaman!"

"Ah! but it is a difficult business finding husbands for our girls nowadays. All my money goes back to my husband's people when I die, and if Margaret's marriage doesn't please my father, he'll cut her clean out of his will. It would be a great happiness to me to see her married safely to a rich man who could give her all she wants." She must have caught the look on Dixon's face, for her own changed. "I'm afraid you're prejudiced in the matter?"

The young journalist could contain himself no longer. "I don't know about prejudice, but, if your niece were a sister of mine, rather than see her make such a marriage, I'd see her lying dead at my feet!"

The elegant woman threw him a curiously shrewd look. "Don't go falling in love with her too, my dear boy."

He laughed. "No need to be anxious on that score: I'm engaged. I'd say the same thing if she were as plain as a pikestaff. The idea of an English girl marrying a Chinaman makes me physically sick."

"Oh, well!"—Mrs Dalrymple slipped the diamond ring into its little velvet box, and shut it up with a snap—"it's no good worrying. He hasn't proposed to her yet." She popped the little ring-case into her ornate gilt bag. "Good-night"—she held out her hand cordially—"as long as you remain invulnerable, I shall be delighted to see you, whenever you feel inclined to come in."

"Thanks very much. If you don't mind I'll get along to my own place over the balcony."

"By all means. That's the way Reggie Carew always comes and goes." She went with him to the French windows and looked out into the night. "What a glorious sky! Just look at those lovely stars! It seems almost a sin to go to bed, doesn't it? I'm quite sorry I sleep on the other side of the house. The air seems so much cooler out here. Good-night."

"Good-night, Mrs Dalrymple." Dixon heard his hostess

locking the windows behind him as he passed down the balcony and put his long legs over the partition which divided the two flats.

At the window of Carew's drawing-room he turned and looked back. The sense of strangeness struck him afresh. He felt as he had felt when he had first looked out from the other side, that he could hardly recognise where he was. He watched the lights go out in Mrs Dalrymple's drawing-room and then, pushing his own windows—which had been left ajar according to his instructions—softly open, he went into his own flat.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE room was in perfect darkness. The windows had closed of themselves in the draught and, in consequence, the air was very stuffy and hot. As for the smell of spice, it was simply overpowering. Dixon, making for the switch next the door, grinned to himself in the darkness at the cleverness of his own idea. "It *is* the smell, and yet it *isn't* the smell," he said to himself, inhaling deep draughts of the sickly, close air. The other smell's much more aromatic and not nearly so spicy. Besides, it comes and goes."

He turned the switch on, and the room was flooded with light. He crossed to the side table where the gilt box stood, and placed it on a small table in the centre of the room. "Cloves, nutmegs and spices of all kinds," he said to himself thoughtfully, thrusting his finger into the shining black mass and letting it run through his fingers back again into the box. Then he held his fingers close to his nose and sniffed at them, his fine nostrils quivering like the nostrils of a frightened horse. "Not a bit like it," he said to himself, shaking his head. "That charming cedarwood fan's much more what I want."

The thought of the fan brought the beautiful girl's face before him. He shut the gilt box and went and stood in front of the mantelpiece, looking up at the impanelled picture of her.

"So you're to be sold, are you?" he said aloud. "Your beautiful body desecrated and your pure soul contaminated, just for the sake of a few diamonds more or less! Poor,

lovely child ! I'd snap you up out of the clutches of those infernal pigtailed and petticoated and marry you, even if you had to sweep a crossing afterwards, if I were Carew."

The lovely face looked down at the young man from the wall, and the blue eyes seemed to laugh into his.

At the remembrance of the look on her face as she sat by the Chinaman, with her hand thrust through his arm, listening like a child to his fantastic legends of the jade dog with the diamond eyes, Mortimer Dixon—healthy, clean-souled young fellow that he was—felt physically sick. He turned on his heel, switched off the light and went down the corridor into his bedroom, meaning to undress.

His bedroom, however, was just as stuffy as the drawing-room. It was not only close, it was hot. The charwoman—with that passion for hermetically sealed rooms, typical of her class—had carefully closed all the windows, and had actually drawn the heavy satin curtains and the holland blinds. To stay in such an atmosphere was an impossibility for his air-loving soul. Besides, he was not tired. His three days of perfect rest had so restored his health that he felt as if he would never want to sleep again.

For half-a-minute he hesitated whether he should not get his hat and coat and go down to the club, or drop in on one or two familiar spirits who never saw the inside of their beds till other people were getting up, but he was no more in the right mood for Fleet Street gossip than he was to dance at a party, the invitation-card for which stuck in his glass.

There was no doubt about it, he was fed up with pretty girls for that night, just as he was fed up with sleep. He felt mentally excited, although he did not know why. The exhilaration which always descended on him when something unusual was about to happen, suddenly caught him in its clutches again. That seventh sense of his, which never betrayed him, rose up suddenly strong within him. Never did man welcome a premonition more gladly. After his illness and the languor of convalescence, for the first time for many days, he felt that he was his own man again.

He slipped out of his dress coat and put on a smoking coat of Carew's. It was a gorgeous affair of quilted grey silk, with the monogram embroidered in silver threads on the pocket outside.

Thrusting his own handkerchief in, he chanced on a

crumpled-up morsel of cambric trimmed with exquisite lace. The initials on it were not the initials of the girl over the mantelpiece. Dixon's fine young face saddened strangely as he popped the dainty morsel into a drawer in the dressing-table. It came to him all at once that he would pass a sleepless hour in writing to Carew.

The writing-table was in the study. He had only to turn the handle of the door, and there were pens and paper and ink—everything to his hand. Yet for the life of him he could not bring himself to go into the room. The influence which it had had on him from the first day of his coming into the flat was so overpowering that he could hardly believe it himself. He was furious at his own weakness. Yet, when he left his bedroom, he went straight back into the drawing-room. To give in to such a thing was an outrageous piece of moral cowardice: this Dixon acknowledged to himself as frankly as if it had been the question of another man. Still he gave in. There was a something that emanated from that sinister place, a psychic influence so strong, that he found himself shuddering as he passed the study door.

In justice to him, it must be said that, had it been a question of work, he would not have hesitated an instant. He would have opened the door as coolly as he had opened the lid of the coffin. But here was no question of work. It was merely a question of an uneasiness so intense that he left the electric light flaring all down the corridor rather than pass the door in the dark.

In all his career he could only recall one mental aversion as strong. As a boy he had been taken in to kiss his dead mother in her bed. He was too young at the time to have any conception of the meaning of that great change, and, slipping from his nurse's hand, he had run forward and flung himself on to the bed before the terrified woman realised what had occurred. The shock to the sensitive child had been so frightful that, for weeks, his rest had been broken at night, and nothing would induce him to go into the room again. It was not until he was sent to school, and went to live in the country with an aunt, that the terror of that experience gradually faded away.

Recalling the incident with something of the old anguish, he found in it a condonation of his own folly that night. Across the years he could still hear the servants whispering

to each other that his childish eyes had pierced the mystic veil which hides life from death, and had seen his mother's ghost. He never could make up his mind whether or no this materialisation of spirit had occurred, for he had straightway fainted. Certain it is, however, that, seated in that study, his subconscious self had experienced the agony, the terror and the fury of despair of the man who had taken his own life there.

He went back into the drawing-room and shut the door. With the force of habit which had become purely mechanical, he had, as usual, slipped his fountain pen into his waistcoat pocket as he dressed that night. Some blank sheets of scribbling paper he knew were to be found in the drawer of the china cabinet, and, drawing these out, he sat himself comfortably down and, making a pad of a weekly periodical, began to write his letter to Carew.

He had not written more than a few lines when a sound attracted his ear.

It was a little scratching sound which recalled, more vividly than he cared to own, the little scratching sound he had heard as he lay in the coffin in the cellar that first night.

"A mouse," he said to himself, lifting his head.

The scratching got louder.

"A rat!" He put down his pen and rose to his feet. The scratching ceased, and there was a noise like a whine.

He went straight to the door and opened it. The whining and the scratching came from the opposite side of the corridor.

In the silence of the night, Dixon stood there and listened.

There was something moving in the study, something living that whined, and snuffled, and scratched; something that was shut in and wanted to get out.

His heart was in his mouth as he stepped across that intervening space and opened the study door.

Out of the darkness there jumped a little white object which snuffled and yelped and whined around his feet in an ecstasy of delight.

It was the little Chinese Chow.

So taken aback was he that, probably for the first time in his life, his sense of humour deserted him. As he stood there, staring down at the little creature frisking around him, he did not even laugh.

The dog had not been in the flat when they had looked for it in the morning. It was not in the study. It was not on the roof. Now, all of a sudden, it was there. Dixon switched on the light, and looked into the room he had learned to hate.

No sign of any living presence. No open window. The trap in the ceiling closed. Everything just the same as always. A few hours ago, the dog had not been there. Now, as if dropped out of the heavens, when he had opened the door, the dog had come out.

The only possible explanation, of course, was, that the charwoman, to serve her own ends—or to spite the girl she disliked—had hidden the dog during the search, and had shut him in the study before she had gone to bed.

That, of course, was the only sane explanation, but Dixon rejected it at once.

Whoever else had done this thing, the charwoman knew nothing about it. From the moment he picked up the little dog, Dixon never wavered in that belief.

Meantime the little truant had returned! Dixon picked up the joyous little ball of fluff, went back into the drawing-room and softly shut the door. Turning up the lights, he carefully examined the dog. There was not a trace of any harm that had come to him during his absence from home.

Since his illness, by the doctor's orders, Dixon had taken a glass of hot milk and some biscuits or cake, the last thing before going to bed. A small table arranged with these refreshments stood by the wall. The young journalist poured some milk into the saucer, and crumbled some sponge cake into it. The dog was neither hungry nor thirsty. It refused to eat or to drink. Yet it had been missing since midday. It was a pampered little idol, accustomed, no doubt, to constant tit-bits from its mistress's meals.

Who then had fed the dog?

As he sat there, watching the dainty little creature turning away from the cake and milk, he remembered his promise. No matter at what hour, if the little creature returned, he had pledged himself to return the dog. He looked at his watch. The hands were at half-past twelve.

He had heard Big Ben booming out the hour of midnight as he crossed his own balcony: therefore it was not half-an-hour since he had come home.

Carrying the dog in his arms, he went to his window, and looked across at the windows of the opposite flat.

All were shrouded in darkness. "The closed eyes of a sleeping house," he murmured. In all probability, behind those drawn blinds, every soul was asleep.

Yet a promise is a promise.

To Dixon, more than to most men, his given word was sacred as an oath.

He stood there an instant, hesitating as to whether to risk the conventions and tap, as the young girl had laughingly instructed him, at her windows, or go down through the house and up the other staircase, and rouse the little household next door, in order to restore the strayed pet.

He chose the less conventional way. Keen, practical man of the world though he was on the one side of him, on the other, he was an impassioned lover of anything that took on the semblance of a romance.

To go down one dreary flight of stairs and up another, and hand in a dog to a frowzled maid whose eyes were dropping with sleep, did not appeal to him. But to slip across the rose-laden balcony, knock at the window, and restore a lost darling to a pair of loving arms, under the gleaming stars and the waning moon, was very much to his taste!

For the third time that day he put his long legs over the partition and tiptoed down the balcony, counting the windows as he went.

The first was the hall; the second was the dining-room; the third and the fourth were the drawing-room; and the fifth and the sixth . . . Dixon chanced both windows belonging to the same room, for they both stood open. He smiled as he stood there in the darkness, trying to make out if the pattern of both the soft lace curtains fluttering to and fro in the breeze was the same.

Then he took his courage in both hands, and knocked softly on the window-pane.

There was not a sound.

He tapped again—this time a little louder.

Again there was no response.

This was awkward. But, as always with him, if anything interfered with what he wanted to do, it simply had the effect of making him more and more determined to do it. He put his ear against the window-pane and listened intently. He told himself he could detect the faint breathing

of the sleeping girl. The situation became more romantic than ever.

A vision presented itself to his imagination of the spoilt young beauty in her laces, lying in her dainty bed, with the empty basket at her feet. If only he could have got the little animal into his pretty nest, so that his mistress, on waking, might find her pet restored to her as if by a magician, how delightful that would have been!

Unhappily, however, the days of fairy princes and sleeping beauties and potent genii are over! The little dog, who did not at all appreciate such fantastic imaginings, with strong common-sense began to whine.

"Hush! Ting! Hush!" whispered Dixon, placing his hand over the little creature's mouth.

It would not be at all romantic were the sleeping beauty to be awakened by a dog barking, and come out to find the fairy prince in a smoking coat, afraid to tap loudly on the window of her bower!

"Hush! Ting! Hush!" He lifted the little creature up and cuddled him under his chin. A second afterwards and he had almost dropped it to the ground. The smell of its silky coat was the smell that obsessed him! Not the spices in the gilt box, not the spoilt beauty's bejewelled fan! but the smell, aromatic, pungent, mysterious, the smell of the East—the smell of death.

Dixon's eyes dilated in the darkness. He clutched at the little dog almost as if he knew that, in its tiny, quivering body, he held under his very hand the clue to the mystery which evaded him.

The dog had been where the smell was!

Where had the dog been?

No more thought of sleeping beauties or fairy princes under the gleaming stars! No thought of anything in the world but the work in hand.

He knocked sharply at the window. There was a sound of something rustling. He knocked again. The light went up. For the third and last time he knocked, calling the girl softly by her name.

In another instant she answered him. His fine ear detected in her soft voice surprise, but not fear. "Who's there?"

"It's I! I've found your dog and I've brought him back as I promised," Dixon whispered softly through the window.

" You *haven't!* "

" I *have.* "

There was a rustling, a pattering of little heeless silk shoes, a little hand drew back the window cautiously, and an exquisite vision in blue chiffon and lace appeared at his side. " You don't mean you've found Ting ? "

" Yes, I do. Here he is. " Dixon held out the little dog. A pair of delicate arms were thrust forward in the darkness, and the girl seized the little creature out of his hands.

" Ting! Ting! You darling! You love! My little angel! " The excited whispering stopped short and she thrust the dog back into Dixon's astonished arms.

" He's jumping so, he'll break my pearls again. Hold him a minute, and I'll take them off. " The charming apparition disappeared. In another minute she was back again. " I always sleep in them, " she explained, with the sweet naivete which, as Dixon had truly said to her aunt not an hour before, was her greatest charm. She thrust her soft arms out into the darkness and caught hold of the dog again. " You darling little Ting, come to your own Mitty! " In her excitement she stepped right out on to the balcony with the dog in her arms.

" You wonderful person! First you save Ting's life, then you find my pearls, then you find Ting! " She thrust her little hand through Dixon's arm and looked up at him with the same dazzling glance he had so resented when she sat on the sofa by the Chinaman's side, thrusting her hand through *his* arm. " How ever can I repay you! Oh, how I do hope some of these days I shall be able to do something for you in return! "

" If you really want to do something for me, send back that Chinaman's ring, " said he, seizing his opportunity. " It's not fair to Carew. "

" You silly old thing! " She burst out into delicious, soft, girlish laughter. " Don't you bother about that! Tell me about Ting. Where did you find him? "

" I was writing in the drawing-room. I heard something scratching and whining in the study. I opened the door and he came out. "

" But we looked in the study this morning. "

" I know we did. "

" But he wasn't there, then. "

" I know he wasn't. "

"Then, how did he get there now? I don't understand."

"No more do I."

The two stared down at each other, in their perplexity quite ignoring the unconventionality of their interview. Margaret Dalrymple cuddled her little pet up under her chin. "I don't care who put him there, as long as he's found," she said joyously. "Mitty's own little Chow-Chow." She lifted her face and looked up at Dixon. "How funny he smells!"

Dixon's heart went thump. "Does he?"

She sniffed at the little dog again. "Yes, *horrid!* You know, that smell we were talking about this evening—like my fan." She sniffed again. "It must be something in the study in your flat."

"I suppose it must."

"I hate that room. I told you that the other day, didn't I?"

"I hate it too."

"We *are* sympathies, aren't we?" The little coquette, quite forgetful of her good resolutions of the morning, flashed a dazzling glance at the handsome young man from her glorious eyes. "Oh, isn't the air beautiful! It's so stuffy inside, and so cool out here. Just look at those stars! Aren't they divine!"

"Divine," said Mortimer under his breath.

Poor fellow! It really *was* rather a romantic situation!—stars, and a hot June night, and the strong perfume of June roses, and a beautiful girl, in all the alluring charm of her exquisite *deshabille*.

Do you wonder that their young hearts beat faster than they ought to have done? After all, what were they! He, a man with the passion of youth rioting hot within him; she, a mere child for all her engaging naïvete, a born enchantress of men.

All the elements of a romantic interlude; nothing vulgar; nothing sordid; just a look and a rose, snatched under the gleaming stars.

But, as it so happened, it was just those gleaming stars that saved Mortimer Dixon. As he lifted his face to them, gazing at the luminous worlds floating in the blue ether, he swore to himself that neither by word nor by look would he swerve from the path which he had pledged himself to tread. He knew very well that he had only to put out his

hand and the pretty little interlude which his artistic imagination longed for could be played to his satisfaction. He could snatch his petty triumph without risk, or fear of discovery. He could, on the morrow, lay his small sin at the feet of his father confessor, the girl he was going to marry, and receive absolution before he asked for it ; but he could never walk up that old churchyard path as he had sworn he would walk, and look his bride in the face, and say to himself : " I have kept my given word." He could never kiss his wife's spotless lips and say to her : " My lips are spotless too." Dixon, his higher self battling with his lower self, lifted his eyes to the stars and found them, indeed, divine.

" You'd better go back to your bed. You'll take cold." He spoke very gently, but his voice was as cold as stone.

" I suppose I must." He heard the beautiful child beside him catch her breath in a little sigh of regret, but, like Ulysses of old, he hardened his heart, even as he had deadened his ears.

" I'd like to stay out here all night."

" So would I," he said quietly. " Good-night."

" Good-night." A delicate little hand slipped into his, nestled there a moment like a little, tender, fluttering bird ; was, indeed, just withdrawing itself, when he felt it close on his again, with a strength surprising in anything so small.

" Look," the girl whispered excitedly. " Look !"

He turned and looked at her. " What is it ?"

" Look across at your flat, you old silly. Don't you see a shadow on the blind ?" She went off into a delighted confusion of soft giggling. " It is your old char doing her hair."

" *My old char doing her hair.*" Dixon dropped the little hand he was holding and leaned forward, staring with all his eyes. True enough, there was a light in the room next his own dining-room. True enough, the blind was drawn, and a shadow distinctly silhouetted itself against the white background—the shadow of a woman doing her hair.

The long flowing movement of the hand holding the brush was as distinctly visible to the two on the balcony as if they had been inside the room.

" Oh," whispered the enraptured voice beside him, " what long hair she's got."

Dixon went cold all over.

The charwoman had short hair.

"Now she's plaiting it! Isn't it fun!"

There was a pause.

"Now she's coiling it up and putting in the hairpins. You'd never think to look at her in the daytime that the old thing was as tidy as that! It's like looking at a scene in a play, isn't it?"

"Ay," thought Mortimer Dixon to himself, "a scene in the greatest play of all—the play of Life."

The light snapped out.

He turned to the beautiful girl beside him. "I really think you ought to go in now. You'll be taking cold."

"I never catch cold. Wait a minute and I'll give you a flower to take with you, to keep in memory of to-night." She leaned over the balcony where the pink rambler roses were growing in long trails from the boxes above. It would have been churlish to have refused so gracious a courtesy, and Dixon was very far from being a churlish man. Yet he could hardly contain himself, even for that moment, so mad was he to get back into the flat. In an agony of impatience he stood beside her, waiting for the flower.

"The horrid thing's so hard I can't break it."

"Let me help you." He bent over the balcony, and was just going to wrench at the stalk, when his quick eye caught sight of something moving down below. Instantly his theory of the tempting accessibility of the flats for predatory burglars flashed across his mind. All the thoughts that had been his as he lay on the balcony looking at the little iron staircase, constructing a possible theft in his imagination, shaped themselves together again in his brain.

"What's the matter? Can't you break the horrid thing?"

"Hush!" said Dixon sharply under his breath. "Be quiet a minute. There's somebody there."

"Somebody where?"

He forced his eyes through the darkness. "Somebody coming up the stairs."

"Silly! Those stairs are never used except in case of fire. There's only one way to get to them, through a door in the basement, which only the hall porter can get at, and a door in the garden wall, which is always kept locked."

Dixon could have cursed the pretty, chattering child. "For God's sake, hold your tongue!" he whispered roughly. "I want to see what it is."

The girl caught at the excitement in his voice, and naturally sprang to a perfectly wrong conclusion.

She clutched his arm with a smothered cry. "You mean the place is on fire."

"Of course there's no fire," he whispered. "Keep quiet, *do*." He bent still lower. "I can make them out quite distinctly; but there's somebody coming up."

"Let me look!" The young girl thrust herself against him and peered over into the darkness. "I can't see anything."

"Keep your eyes fixed on that shadow just down there." He pointed as he spoke. "*There*, now don't you see something moving?"

"Yes." The little soft figure pressed itself still closer to Dixon. "Oh, what heavenly fun! Who on earth can it be?"

"I don't know yet."

"But what can they want? I say, if you weren't here, I should be most horribly frightened. Who do you think they are?"

"I think they're thieves," said Dixon quietly.

"*Thieves!* My God! my pearls!"

It was Dixon's own thought she had uttered.

"I'll go and wake auntie."

He snatched at her arm. "Stay where you are!"

"Then I'll go and telephone for the police."

"You'll do no such thing! You do just what I tell you. Go into your room quietly, and snap out the light as quick as you can."

As on the day when her pearls had been lost in the hall, something in the girl responded to the master mind. Without a single syllable she slipped inside the window and snapped out the light. He put out his hand and roughly told her to stay where she was. "Don't speak and don't stir. Stand there until I tell you to move. Then shove your pearls somewhere out of the way, and get on to the telephone, while I tackle them out here."

He closed the windows noiselessly and bent over the balcony again.

CHAPTER XXXV

No question about it, something noiseless and stealthy was slowly coming up the steps.

"Why on earth do they come so slowly?" Dixon asked himself. "Thieves always move quickly. Yet, if they're not thieves, who are they?"

He held his breath and waited.

On the top flight of the iron steps, the moon, which was rising rapidly behind the chimney-stacks, lay like a pool of molten gold. "I wish to goodness they'd hurry up. When they cross that bar of light, at least I shall be able to tell how many there are."

He knelt down and, thrusting his head forward through the festoons in the balcony, he craned his neck to try and catch sight of what was going on down below. To his intense surprise he could see nothing.

There was no movement. There was no sound. There were no men. There was nothing but darkness and silence. Dixon, all his life in his ears, asked himself if the destination of the intruders, whoever they were, was a lower flat. He was just deciding to draw his head back and reassure the frightened girl, when something shifted on the staircase again.

Slowly, slowly, whoever they were, they were coming up.

Dixon withdrew his head, got to his feet and hung over the balcony, his heart in his mouth. They were moving now, and had reached the last flight.

Then it was that it dawned upon him why they were coming up so slowly. They were carrying something—something heavy, something long.

What in God's name were they bringing up that iron staircase in the dead of the night?

"A human body! A mummy-case! A box containing treasure! *A coffin!*"

Hardly had the word formulated itself in his mind than the first man reached the step where the ray of the moon lay like a bar of gold. For an instant his figure was outlined in that golden haze, then he disappeared.

The second man's head came into view.

Then the object they were carrying—a mass of blackness, oblong in shape, obliterated the pool of light.

Then a third man came into view. Then a fourth.

Dixon could now distinguish the gasping of their breath, as of men strained to the utmost limitation of their strength.

Last of all came a tall, commanding figure, at sight of whom he crouched down into the shadows, he, in turn, gasping for breath. The figure turned, and the last ray of the moon fell on his face. No mistaking who that was! Livid and distorted with hate, it shone out white in the moonlight, the black patch on the left cheek standing out in bold relief.

To Dixon, trembling with excitement, it seemed like an eternity before the men took up their burden and moved on again.

Now he could see them distinctly.

Now they had reached the top.

Four men carrying something in their midst, so heavy that they could hardly raise it from the earth.

The lights in Carew's drawing-room flashed up.

The windows were thrown open to their fullest extent. The little procession of the four bearers and the coffin passed in, the Chinaman following them.

Then the windows swung to noiselessly again and the lights went down.

Dixon could have screamed with excitement and joy. He darted back to the window and pushed it open. Before Margaret Dalrymple realised what he was doing, he had closed the windows, pulled down the blind, drawn the curtains and turned on the light.

"What on earth are you doing?"

He turned and looked at her. As he stood there with the beautiful girl in her muslins and laces looking up at him, it might have been a dream. With her dog in her arms, and her golden curls hanging around her face, she looked almost like a child. "What *are* you doing? Where are they? What's the matter?"

He went to her, and took her by the hand. "Look here," he said quietly, "I was wrong. Those men aren't thieves."

"Then *who* are they?"

Mortimer Dixon was a truth-teller by nature. He never could be brought to see the use of telling lies. He told the plain truth now. "They're the men I'm after."

"*The men you're after?*"

"Look here," he said, in a whisper, "I can trust you, can't I?"

"Yes." A resolute little hand thrust itself into his hand in token of good faith. "Do you mean it's another adventure?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean to say they've gone into Reggie's flat? I thought it was queer you're being there, when you'd rooms of your own in town. How madly exciting! Tell me more."

"I can't tell you any more. I can only tell you that it's the chance of my life. If you'll help me, I think I may bring it off."

"I help you? How?"

He looked at her. "What," he asked himself, "lies behind that beautiful face and those dazzling eyes? Is she just a charming coquette, an exquisite child, or is there a woman behind it?—a woman who knows how to be silent, and how to be strong? This is how you can help me," he said. "First by promising not to mention this to a living soul."

"I promise."

"Not even your aunt?"

"Not even my aunt."

"Then I want you to help me to get out on to the roof."

"How?"

Mortimer Dixon bent down to her eagerly. "There's a trapdoor in each of these top flats that leads out on to the roof. In Carew's flat it's in the study. Of course I don't know what room it leads out of in yours."

"I do. It leads out of here."

He looked up at the ceiling. "Do you mean out of this room?"

"Yes."

He positively gasped.

"It's a question of life and death to me," he said, half to himself. "I wonder if I dare take the risk."

The girl heard, and her eyes grew round as saucers. "Do you mean you're afraid of the risk?"

"Not of the risk."

"Of what, then?"

Most men would have lied to her, but not Dixon. He looked her straight in the eyes and said, as simply as if he had been asking for a piece of bread and butter, "I'm so deadly afraid of anyone seeing me come out of your room."

Then it was that the true nature of the girl came out. "Silly!" she said contemptuously. "What on earth difference does *that* make. I may be an idiot, you know, but I'm not such an idiot as *that*!"

"You're an angel! Show me where the trap is."

"Up there. Just above my bed." She nodded her pretty head with tremendous self-satisfaction. "I watched the men going up once when they were doing the telephone."

"Do you mind if I take off my boots?"

"No, of course not." She swept a bundle of lace furbelows off a chair and pulled it forward. "Sit down there."

He sat down and began to take off his boots.

There was no doubt about it, if ever a man had the knack of getting himself into curious situations, Mortimer Dixon had that knack.

Yet, there he sat, as cool as a cucumber, and, to be honest, there stood the girl watching him, as cool as a cucumber too.

There was something about the young fellow that made women instinctively trust him. No matter how impossible the things he demanded of them, they always came up to the scratch. Perhaps it was his cocksure way of taking everything for granted; perhaps it was because he made them so thoroughly understand his work came first and they came after the work; perhaps it was because the innate goodness of the man radiated out of him, and made them understand that, wherever he was, as far as one human being could protect another, they would never come to any harm.

Myself, I think it was that.

Meantime, they trusted him. Meantime, also, Mortimer Dixon took off his boots.

"What shall I do with the beastly things?" He stood in his stockinged feet holding them in his hand.

"Leave them here till to-morrow. I'll hide them in my hatbox."

He felt inclined to scream with laughter. The idea of his boots finding hospitality with six feet of ostrich feather was, he thought, the funniest thing he had ever heard in his life.

"You sweet little thing," he said, in his cool way, "your hats aren't taking any boots! I'll leave them on the roof."

Shall I move the bedstead and get a chair to stand on, or may I stand on the bed ? ”

“ Stand on the bed, of course.”

He put his boots neatly together on the floor—then he deftly turned back the delicate silk and lace counterpane, and jumped up on the bed.

The room was pretty lofty, but he could just manage, by standing on tiptoe, to reach the ceiling with one hand. Try as he would, however, he could not get hold of the bolt. He pulled, and he tugged, and he shoved, and he jumped, but the bolt, which was jammed home, held good. “ The confounded thing won’t budge an inch,” he muttered, looking down at the girl.

“ Wait a second ! I’ll get the poker ! ” She picked up the poker and gave it to him.

He looked at it with comical despair. It was one of those pretty little things fit only for the dainty use of a pretty girl’s bedroom. As a work of art it was charming ; as a poker it was no good at all. Still, it was that or nothing. Holding it at its extreme length, he swung it forward and gave the head of the bolt a good bang.

In the silence of the night the noise sounded as if a cannon had gone off.

“ Be careful or you’ll wake auntie ! ”

“ I’ll be careful.”

He swung the poker a little more heavily, and gave the bolt another bang.

“ Auntie’s a light sleeper,” the girl implored him. “ Be careful, *do*.”

“ I’ll be careful,” he responded earnestly. He nodded down at her, his handsome young face alight with eagerness. “ It’s giving ! ” he said. For the third time he grasped the unfortunate poker and banged at the bolt again. This time he was careful with a vengeance ! The bolt gave with a creak, the head of the poker flew off, and in its descent caught a tumbler at the edge of the washstand and the two things, together, came down with a crash.

Careful indeed ! The noise was enough to wake the dead !

The two young people looked at each other, and they began to laugh. It really was rather funny ! But it was not funny very long.

In the silence that ensued there came the sound of a door opening.

"Auntie! Quick, into that wardrobe!"

Before Mortimer Dixon had well realised what she was doing, she had shoved the dog into his arms, and he was off the bed and into the wardrobe. The girl—quick-witted as she was beautiful—had caught up his boots and, dressing-gown and all, nipped into bed.

In another second the door was softly opened, and Mrs Dalrymple came in.

With a candle in her hand, a red flannel dressing-gown and a small amount of dark hair screwed up on top of her head, she was so different from the elegant, gold-headed woman of an hour before, that Dixon, catching a glimpse of her through the wardrobe door, which he had left open, had hard work to prevent himself laughing aloud.

"Did you hear that noise?"

Dixon could hear how excited she was by her voice.

"What noise, auntie?"

"First of all a kind of bang, and then a fearful crash."

"Oh, that! It was a glass fell off the edge of the wash-stand. I'm so sorry it woke you, darling."

"How on earth did it fall? Did you push it?"

"No, auntie; it just fell."

"I hope the water won't go through to the next ceiling."

"Don't worry, auntie; there was nothing in it."

"I'll look and make sure."

If Dixon did not shake in his boots, it was because he had not got any boots on to shake in! As the tall figure in the red dressing-gown passed the crack in the door, the little dog in his arms gave a soft little wriggle. "Oh, Jemima! he said to himself in an anguish of terror. "I'll wring your little neck if you dare to bark." He held the tiny little muzzle in his hand.

"It's simply shivered to atoms. I'd better pick the pieces up."

"You might cut your fingers. Susan'll sweep it up in the morning when she comes."

"Be sure you don't cut your feet."

The figure passed back again, and Dixon told himself, by the sound of his voice, that Mrs Dalrymple was standing by the bed.

"How is it you're not asleep, darling?"

"It's so hot, auntie."

"You're not worrying about Ting, are you?"

"No, darling, of course I'm not."

At the sound of his own name, spoken in the familiar tones, the little dog wriggled so violently that he nearly fell out of Dixon's hands.

"That Mr Dixon seemed to be sure of finding him. I wonder if he will."

"I'm certain he will, auntie."

"Quite a pleasant young man, didn't you think, dear?"

"Yes, auntie; I liked him very much."

"So good-looking, and such good manners! What a pity he hasn't money! He's just the kind of man I should like you to marry."

"If this goes on much longer," Dixon said to himself, "I shall have to come out."

"Such a pity that these detrimental are always the nicest men! Fortunately the delightful wretch is engaged, or I shouldn't let him come here again."

"Why not, auntie? Are you afraid I should fall in love with him?"

"No, my dear; but I'm afraid he might fall in love with you. And, indeed, if you did, I shouldn't blame you. I'm quite in love with him, myself."

"So am I," said the little coquette, who knew the wardrobe door was open, and was enjoying herself immensely. "I think he's frightfully good-looking, and so well dressed! Did you notice his boots?"

"His boots, my dear? No, I can't say that I did."

"I did. I don't believe I shall forget them as long as I live."

"My dear child, don't be absurd! If you're going on like that about him, I sha'n't let him come here again. Now, put away your book and don't read any longer. It's time you went to sleep. Good-night, darling."

"Good-night, auntie. I'm so sorry I woke you up."

There was a sound of a kiss, and once again the door opened and shut.

Then there was a dead pause.

"You can come out," whispered the girl, slipping out of the bed.

Cautiously Dixon emerged; his face was as red as fire, and his audacious blue eyes were sparkling with laughter and fun.

“ Aren't you glad auntie's in love with you ? ” asked the girl, giggling helplessly.

“ Not half as glad as I am that *you're* in love with *me*.”

“ But she didn't notice your boots.”

“ I don't care, *you're* never going to forget them as long as you live.”

The two good-looking young creatures stood there in the middle of the night and shook with laughter.

Then Dixon put the little Chow tenderly back in his basket, jumped up on the bed, and, seizing the end of the unfortunate poker, he gently pushed open the trapdoor.

“ Not a word to anybody, remember ! ”

“ Not a soul. You're sure they aren't thieves ? ”

“ Perfectly certain.”

“ Can you get up, or shall I give you a chair ? ”

“ I can get up.”

He got hold of the edge of the opening, and exerting all his strength, he pulled himself up.

The girl jumped on the bed, and spoke to him through the trapdoor.

“ You *are* strong, aren't you ? ”

“ Thank goodness I am.”

“ Here are your boots.” One by one she held them up.

“ Thanks.”

“ You're sure you can get down all right through Reggie's flat ? ”

“ Yes. The telephone men were here to-day. I noticed when I was in there this evening that the trapdoor wasn't bolted.”

The beautiful young girl thrust her little hand upwards.

“ I say, you're not going into any danger, are you ? ” In the moonlight, her dazzling eyes were full of a sudden fear.

As usual, Dixon spoke the truth, plain and simple. “ I'm not sure.”

“ If you don't turn up in the morning, shall I send round and inquire ? ”

“ I wish you would.”

“ Right-o ! If you're not here by eleven, I will.”

“ You're an angel ! ” He snatched at the little fingers through the opening and, kneeling down, kissed them with fervour. “ Take your hands away now, for I'm going to shut the trap.”

“ At eleven to-morrow, then. Good-night, and good luck.”

“ Good-night ; and thank you more than I can say.”

He shut down the trapdoor, and in another instant was speeding across the roof towards his own flat. As he took his swift and noiseless way, he was conscious of a sudden feeling of uneasiness.

Each time that he had set out on one of these dare-devil adventures, some woman had sped him on his way. Coincidence, no doubt, but, if coincidence, still strange.

The superstition which is a component part of a temperament like his was so ingrained in him that, as he ran, he caught himself wishing that beautiful Margaret Dalrymple, who had helped him so unflinchingly, had said “ God bless you,” instead of “ Good luck,” when wishing him “ good-night.”

Still, if luck was the one thing needed to make this night of miracles complete, he could certainly not complain that he had not had his share ! Luck, indeed, seemed to follow his steps as persistently as failure follows the footsteps of other men. From the beginning, nothing had gone wrong. The whole thing seemed to open out in front of him, as though planned and designed by a master hand. “ *God’s hand,*” Dixon said to himself reverently. Even during those terrible hours when he was imprisoned in the coffin, his whole being had been informed with a confidence of ultimate success, that not even the horrors of that incarceration could dispel.

Now, suddenly, when he most needed it, at the very moment when, it seemed to him, he had only to put out his hand and grasp the prize for which he had striven—now, at the moment when he should, by rights, have felt more elated, he was most depressed.

That inner voice, which Dixon used laughingly to call his “ Inspiration,” began to stir again. So far it had told him persistently to go forward, now, as insistently, it told him to hold back.

But there was no holding back for him.

He knew he was going into danger. He was not a man to underrate the danger of what he was about to do, but, for the life of him, he could not help doing it.

“ I said I’d carry it through if I died for it, and so I will,” he said to himself in a kind of fury. “ I can sit on the top of this roof and, over the parapet, watch what’s going on. I can go back to where I’ve come from, and over the

Dalrymples' telephone summon the help of the police. I've got a jolly good case to go on. I've seen men who have no business there go into my flat. I've only to wake that girl's aunt, explain matters to the hall porter, and the thing's as right as rain."

Why on earth, then, did not Mortimer Dixon do it ?

Because he was a fool !

No ; simply because he could not induce himself—just for the sake of his own personal safety—to forgo the exquisite triumph which would be his, if he could fulfil the promise he had made that afternoon in Fleet Street, at his interview with that extraordinary personality whom to serve had been, for the last three years, the secret ambition of his young life.

What ! Call up the police, call up the hall porter, catch these men—whatever they were up to—and take them off to prison, just as if they were common thieves ! Appear as witness against them, tell a laughing court the story of what he had done ! Receive a compliment from the presiding magistrate as if he were an ordinary detective and, finally, when he went back to the office, get a rise in his salary for his 'cuteness and, perhaps, if he were lucky, a chance word of praise from his idol, *en passant* !

Was *that* to be his reward after all he had gone through !

No. It was not the compliment from the magistrate that he wanted ; it was not the rise in salary that he looked for ; it was not for a few lines of newspaper praise that he had worked. It was to see the light in those deep-set eyes flashing its quiet approval ; it was to feel that frail hand tightening on his ; to hear that suave voice saying, " Well done." *That* was his ambition. To gain that, he was prepared to risk everything he had in the world, even his own life.

He knelt down on the cold stone, put his boots down quietly beside him, and located the trapdoor. As he had known, the bolt on the ceiling inside had not been replaced after the men had gone. He took out his pocket-knife and gently prised it open. Turning the flap noiselessly backwards, he put his face over the aperture and stared down into the darkness. There was nothing to see.

He cast an anxious eye up at the heavens. The night had changed. The moon was, now partially, now wholly,

obscured by the racing clouds. A light summer wind had sprung up.

"His star," as the girl he loved used to call Jupiter, had set.

"It's like the first night when I went down to the cellar in Whitechapel," he said to himself. "It only needs the Chink."

The thought had scarcely formulated itself in his brain when the moon, released from her bondage of clouds, fell slantwise across the opening of the trapdoor.

There, below him, as if a veil had been withdrawn, stood the Chinaman looking up at him from the darkness. No mistaking that inscrutable countenance, nor the darkness of those melancholy eyes.

Illusion or no illusion, the sight drove Dixon to madness.

"Alive and kicking, are you!" he cried. "By the God that made me, so am I!" He swung his long legs over the aperture, caught hold and let himself down.

Had he been going headlong into perdition he would have gone down just the same.

As he went down, the moon went out. He missed his hold in the darkness.

As he plunged head-foremost through the opening, the men who had been waiting for him came noiselessly forward and caught him as he fell.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WHEN Mortimer Dixon came to himself, he was lying in front of the fireplace, on the study floor.

At first, like a person recovering from a delirium, he could not make out what had happened. He tried to move his feet. He couldn't. He tried to lift his hands. They felt as if they were nailed to the floor. He tried to open his mouth. The only result was to make him bite still more fiercely at the gag which was forced between his teeth.

He opened his eyes languidly and looked around. Yes, it was Carew's study right enough. Bookcases, books, tables, chairs; all Carew's. Gathering a little strength, he explored a little farther. He glanced at the elegant carpet. Yes, that was Carew's carpet: he remembered the design.

The particular patch where the colours were a little lighter must have been the spot where the man had lain who committed suicide. His glance went to the curtains. He could distinctly recall his inconsequent dislike of them the first day he went into the flat. They were a dark red with a green border. He wondered why the devil the man who designed them had not had the sense to make the border a lighter shade of red.

Carew's curtains, Carew's carpet, Carew's furniture—Carew's study!

Then what the dickens was he doing, lying on the floor?

He pondered this problem for what seemed to him quite a long time. That he felt ill, that he could not sleep, did not seem to matter at all. The only thing that obsessed his mind was, why the dickens he was lying on Carew's floor.

Very soon he gave it up as a bad job. He was there, and that was sufficient. He was not going to worry his head about a silly little thing like lying on Carew's carpet, when he could worry about a really serious matter like the border of the curtains being green instead of red. Dixon lay and glared at them solemnly. He wished Carew would come in, and promise to change them back to red. He thought he would get a paintpot and paint them red himself. He wondered if Carew would mind. Then he thought he would turn them inside out. This idea amused him so that he must have thought about it for quite ten minutes. Then the thought occurred to him, that perhaps the green border showed through on the other side, and he began to worry himself sick again.

Meantime the sun was shining through the objectionable curtains. It must have been quite an hour after he recovered consciousness, that it gradually dawned upon him that, when the sun shone, it was generally day.

Day! and he lying on the floor of Carew's study! He was quite delighted with this new worry. It took his mind off the curtains. Why on earth was he lying on the floor if it was day?

Was he ill, and nobody knew about it? Was he drunk, and had gone mad, and they had strapped him down in a strait waistcoat, or was he asleep and dreaming?

He decided he was asleep and dreaming. This pleased

him immensely. He made up his mind that he would turn the dream into a story as soon as he awoke.

Meantime he wished that he could dream on cushions. He found the floor in Carew's study uncommonly hard !

Now Dixon was a vivid dreamer. As far back as he could remember, he had always dreamed. Often, in his dreams, he would recall previous happenings. He had consulted a Harley Street physician on the subject, who had told him that a restless brain like his rarely, if ever, was totally quiescent, even in sleep.

There was one nightmare of his that he hated more than all the rest of them put together—a nightmare of a little black kitten which grew into a great black cat, and sat on his chest, and scratched at his eyes with its claws. In this dream, someone came and took the cat away from him, and when he opened his eyes he, Mortimer Dixon, was blind.

"This is a pretty bad nightmare, not to be able to move my hands or feet, or to speak—but, anyway, I can see," he said to himself. "I can see everything distinctly. The pictures on the wall, the inkstand on the table, the dust on the silk shade of the electric light, the happy flies whirling ceaselessly round the ceiling . . ."

He looked up at the ceiling, and stopped dreaming. No need to bother himself any further. *He knew why he was lying on Carew's floor.*

The shock of it was overwhelming. The dinner, the dog, the scene on the balcony ; the hiding in the wardrobe, the getting up through the ceiling, the racing across the roof, the looking down into the darkness . . . he remembered it all.

So vivid was the impression, that he could almost see the distorted moon in the racing heavens ; he could almost feel the night wind on his face, presageful of the threatening storm ; he could almost hear that inner voice of his which warned him not to go onwards alone.

That was the worst of all. He had deliberately undertaken to do the work of half-a-dozen men single-handed. He had been the most prodigious of fools—the fool that has overrated his own strength. The most pitiless thought which came to him that day was, that he deserved all he had got. So jealous had he been lest anyone should have a look in and share his glory, that he had overreached himself in his greed.

✶ Mortimer Dixon—the audacious, brilliant, irresistible Mortimer—had failed.

For a long, long time he lay still, and contemplated what that failure might mean—certain humiliation; probable suffering; possible death.

He wondered what they were going to do with him. If they would torture him before they killed him—the Chinese were great at torturing, he had heard. He wondered if he, in his turn, would be one of those “mysterious disappearances” like the girl he had found. His eyes flashed at the thought of the girl. Whatever might be the outcome of this mad adventure of his for himself—at least, he had saved the girl.

Most of all he wondered what this mystery might really mean!

Who was the Chinaman who kept the laundry? Where had he gone to when he had arisen from the death he had so miraculously assumed? Whom did those strange men, in that strange house, think they were saluting for the last time, as he, Dixon, lay in that coffin? Who was that man of suave voice and commanding presence with whom he had dined; whose frail hands glittered with jewels, whose mesmeric glance had cajoled the young beauty to his side with his talk about a fortune-telling dog with diamond eyes? Most of all, what did that solemn little procession mean, winding itself noiselessly up the outside stairs in the moonlight? What was the connection between these aristocrats of great China and the Whitechapel char? What was this big thing he had been “up against,” into whose living heart he had thrust his hand so fearlessly that he had felt its pulse beating beneath his fingers, just at the very moment when he had failed?

And he had failed! All his courage, all his daring, all his cleverness gone for nothing!

Truly his star had set.

Well, it was a poor end to a great beginning. It was hard luck to have to die, when he had hardly begun to know what it is to live, but what of that? Better men than he had failed; greater men than he had begun well and ended badly; cleverer men than he had given forth brilliant hopes of a great promise that, in the end, remained unfulfilled.

If he went down, at least he went down in good company. He had tried his best and failed.

Of the girl he loved, he deliberately refused to think. With that iron self-control that was partly character and partly the result of perpetual self-training, he resolutely put the thought of her and her sorrow out of his head. For once in his life, Dixon forgot her. He preferred to think of himself.

With returning strength—and his strength, badly mauled though he had been, cruelly bound though he was, *was* returning—it naturally followed that his mentality recovered its balance at the same time.

His alert mind went to and fro to see if there was any possibility of finding a way out. He had got himself out of so many messes that it seemed almost incredible that here, at last, was one from which he could *not* find a way out. He rolled, and shoved, and pushed himself into a different position, and looked at his hands and feet.

From the smooth surface they presented, a more ignorant man might have courted hope. Not so Dixon. This was no amateur binding, such as he himself had used to tie up the Chinaman whom he found struggling with the lost girl in the mysterious house. This was the work of a master who thoroughly knew his work.

It is only in story-books and melodramas that the hero frees himself from bonds that it would take a Hercules to break; just as it is only in melodramas and story-books that the hero fights unarmed, and single-handed, half-a-dozen doughty warriors armed to the teeth, and comes off victorious every time.

Mortimer Dixon, unhappily, was no hero in melodrama. He was a real person, living a real life, who had got himself into a real hole—as most people do in real life, through his own fault. He could no more have broken his bonds and set himself free than he could have screamed for help with the gag in his mouth.

Foolhardy though he was, he was no fool. He realised the position of his own helplessness instantly. It was no good cursing and getting into a fury. It was no good rolling about in a frantic endeavour to free himself by sheer physical strength. There was only one thing to do, and he did it—that was to lie still and wait.

Now it is one thing to lie still and wait on a comfortable sofa, or in a luxurious bed; but to lie still and wait when you are suffering agonies from cramp, and you are nearly

suffocated from a great lump of stuff shoved into your mouth, is quite another pair of shoes. Still, Dixon resigned himself as cheerfully as might be, to waiting.

He was too good a fighter not to know when he was beaten. He was of too buoyant a disposition not to keep hoping until death itself put an end to the possibility of hope. He rolled himself back into his former position, which was, if possible, a fraction less horribly uncomfortable than the one he had wriggled himself into, and waited; patiently forcing his nerves not to betray him; every drop of fighting force in him conserving his physical strength. And as he waited his active brain went over the ground at a furious rate, time after time, to see what little chance of discovery of his plight and of outside help there might be left.

There is no doubt about it, Life is the great humourist. Mortimer Dixon's greatest hope lay in his evening boots!

"The telephone men will come here this morning," he thought to himself. "Of course they won't let them in. If the matter is urgent, possibly they'll go up to the roof through another trapdoor. If they do, they're bound to discover my boots! They will be frightfully excited, and will take them down to the hall porter. The hall porter will be frightfully excited and will take them to the police. The police will not be excited at all, and will promise to inquire into the matter. That means, I shall be dead long before they have lifted a finger. On the other hand, that girl next door will hear of it, and will tell what happened last night, and they will search the flat."

His blue eyes began to sparkle. Not for the first time in his existence—it was indeed a favourite expression of his—he blessed his boots.

The second little fraction of hope which presented itself to him was the promise Margaret Dalrymple had made that, if he did not turn up before eleven in the morning, she would send in to inquire after his health. That hope he dismissed in a minute. They would answer the bell and say he was out. The third hope was the chauffeur, who might possibly force his way in. That was a good, solid thought, but doubtless he, too, would be satisfied by the charwoman's plausible explanation that "Mr Dixon had gone off that morning and would not be back till next day."

The people at Duke Street, of course, were out of the question. They would sit tight and wait for him. He had

cut himself off from all hope in that quarter by his own commands.

Remained, the Plump Little Party at Brixton.

At the thought of her and what all this would mean to her his heart stood still. A vision presented itself to him of the dear little soul sitting in her garden, happily stitching away amongst her birds and flowers. Not a week had elapsed since he, lying in the coffin, had sworn to himself, that never again would he undertake work that might bring sorrow and suffering to that sweet soul, and here he was, pinioned and gagged, helpless before his enemies, who, for all he knew to the contrary, might be calmly making their plans as to his disposal in the next room.

Then it was that he cursed himself! "This is the last time I'll do it, I swear it," he said to himself. "This is the end of it all." He stopped short in his dreamings, penetrated through and through with the irony of the situation. He, like others before him, was great at making promises when all need of promises was at an end.

For this was the end. If the whole of Fleet Street arrived with Scotland Yard at the back of it, they could kill him before his rescuers could get him out.

"*Hic jacet* Mortimer Dixon, a bumptious, bouncing ass, who failed. R.I.P."

If tears and prayers availed, as the parsons believe, as long as the girl he loved lived, Mortimer Dixon's peace in the next world was assured.

At that moment the electric bell shrilled through the flat. He looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. Its hands stood at nine. "The telephone men," he said to himself. Then he rated himself for a fool. The clock in the study was not going. He had never used that room.

Meantime he could hear the door being opened and voices speaking—a man's voice and a woman's, answering him. Perhaps it was *not* the telephone men. Perhaps it was merely the ordinary morning conversation that took place daily between the chauffeur and the char. Whoever it was, the interview did not last long. The door slammed and he heard her "fairy footfall," as he always called it, going past the door.

Even in his extremity he was pretty sick about the char-woman. He had saved her from a bad predicament. He thought she might have remembered *that*, when she knew

how things were going with him. With a sigh he dismissed her. After all, what could he hope from her!

For a long, long time, he waited again. He whiled away the time by making up a story, the title of which was to be "The Salvation of a Pair of Boots." He had just landed his hero in the most delightful situation—in the heroine's arms—when the bell again startled him from his dreams.

The man with the milk? Or the girl from next door?

He strained his ears, but, for all his fine sense of hearing, he could distinguish nothing but the same confused murmurings which had passed before. Again the door banged, and again the charwoman's heavy step went past the door. The second interview had lasted no longer than the first.

His eyes, purely from force of habit, went to the clock. Its hands stood at a quarter past ten. Then the clock was going. That seemed to him, in the midst of all the strange things which had happened to him, perhaps the strangest of them all.

For quite a long time he watched the little thing. Now that he had once noticed it, he could distinctly hear it ticking away across the room. He told himself—and with truth—that his nerves must have had a pretty bad jar, otherwise he would have noticed it before.

He wondered who on earth had set it going in a room that was never used.

Whoever it was, he blessed that person. The ticking broke the dreadful silence. It seemed like something living. It also helped him not to exaggerate the time which, in his misery, he would naturally be prone to do.

He kept his eyes on the little clock and, punctually at eleven, the bell shrilled through the flat again.

"That's the girl from next door."

He was right. The girl it was.

She, like Mortimer Dixon, had sat with her eye on the clock, waiting for the time to come when she had promised to go round. Try as she would, she could not rid herself of a certain uneasiness as to what the result of his mad escapade had been. But for her promise to him, she would have roused her aunt and told her the whole story; wakened the hall porter and told him to go up at once to Dixon's flat. But her promise, given in a moment of intense excitement, sealed her lips.

Frivolous little coquette though she was, there was one

thing which she held sacred—her given word. In addition to this, there was her implicit confidence in Dixon himself. All that she had heard about him from her lover, all that she knew about him herself surrounded Dixon with such a halo of successful audacity, that it seemed to her impossible that a man, at once so self-confident and clever, could ever get himself into any mess from which he could not get out !

She was too inexperienced to realise that those are the very men whose failures cost them most dear. She waited, therefore, until the appointed time. The clocks, striking eleven, found her on the mat.

The charwoman answered the door and her inquiry, told her that Mr Dixon was out, and was not expected back until late that night.

It sounded plausible enough, but, to make assurance doubly sure, Margaret Dalrymple asked permission to go in and write a note. She was shown into the drawing-room without demur ; she scrawled a few lines and left the note for Mortimer Dixon, then—there was nothing else for her to do—she went away.

Part of this conversation Dixon overheard. His quick wits reconstructed the scene for him exactly as it took place. He could hear the swish of the girl's silk petticoats as she came down the corridor. He could distinguish every word she said to the charwoman, so sweetly shrill was her voice. The sweat poured like water down his face as he lay there and heard what was being said. When he heard the front door bang, and the charwoman passing again to the kitchen, he thought he should have gone mad.

He had known all the time he had nothing to hope from her visit, yet, as long as she had not been, and as long as she was actually there, unconsciously, he had hoped. Now that she was gone there seemed no hope left. All that he had to do was to wait until the Brixton telephone rang up.

He lay and waited. Intolerable waiting ! His legs were so numb he could hardly feel them. His hands were so cramped that, if he shifted an inch, the pain was so intense, but for the gag in his mouth, he would have screamed. As for the gag itself, the torture of it was unspeakable. His throat was parched, and his tongue so swollen that every time he swallowed he thought that swallow would be the last.

To add to his suffering, the atmosphere of the room was

stifling. To a man such as he, who loved air with the same passion that he loved soap and water, the unopened windows, the heavy curtains, the closed door, was misery enough in all conscience, but the suffocating atmosphere was as nothing compared with the odious smell which permeated the room.

As the day went by and the sun waxed hotter and hotter, so did the smell become more and more aromatic. It drove him frantic.

It was like being buried alive.

Still his self-control held good. Until the actual death-struggle commenced, when he could breathe no longer and delirium would probably set in, he would not move an inch. It was of no use to struggle in the first place, and, in the second, he would exhaust what little strength he might have. So he lay there, hour after hour, and watched the little clock.

As he watched, his thoughts the first time he had entered the flat came back to him—the sense of mystery, the sense of warning, the sense of fatality! How he recalled them all! Truly the hall porter had prophesied rightly when he said that the flat was unlucky, and brought sorrow to all who lived there. God knew, it had brought sorrow enough to him. Yet he had always been so lucky. It seemed to him hardly possible, even in his extremity, that his luck no longer held good.

To have gone so far, to have dared so much, to have come through so triumphantly, and now to end up in this idiotic way. Not a chance to defend himself! Simply to lie on his back trussed up like a fowl and—in a London flat with the telephone on the table and the servant in the kitchen; the hall porter downstairs and actual friends of his own in next door—resignedly suffocate to death!

The humiliation of it was the worst agony of all.

So enraged was he that he could have screamed, and sobbed, and raved, and strained, and torn at his bonds, until he was dead.

Instead, he just lay still and suffered.

That was the only thing by which he could redeem himself in his own eyes, though no one else might ever know it, to lie there, not struggling uselessly against his fate, but accepting it calmly, like a man.

For all he knew to the contrary, the men who had bound

him were watching him through unseen peepholes. Every one knows the capacity of the Chinese to suffer with a splendid indifference. Mortimer Dixon swore by all his gods that, if they were looking on at his agonies, no matter what else they could say of him, he would force them to own that an Englishman, no less than a Chinaman, could face, with perfect dignity and self-control, the tortures of physical suffering and the terror of death.

CHAPTER XXXVII

TWELVE o'clock came and went.

One o'clock came and went.

Mortimer Dixon had been lying in his agony for just on twelve hours.

As the time passed the sun grew hotter and hotter, the air grew closer and closer, and the smell grew stronger and stronger. The room was like a little hell.

Dixon, conscious that his self-control was fast failing him, held on to himself for all he was worth. He told himself he could not last very much longer. His whole soul went up in a desperate supplication to God, to give him the strength to keep holding on—holding on—until the end.

It was at this moment that the study door opened, and the Chinaman with whom he had dined the night before came in.

So noiselessly did he enter that Dixon was not aware of his presence until he looked up and actually saw him standing by his side.

The last time they had met—barely over twelve hours before—they had sat at meat together, surrounded by all the luxury and beauty art and money could devise. They had talked as two men of the world talk when they meet, and now, on the very threshold of death, as if to emphasise the mockery of the situation, Dixon remembered he was still wearing his evening clothes.

So they met again, these two men, each, in his own way, a typical representative of the best of his own nation—East and West—European and Oriental—white and yellow: the one in his extremity, the other triumphantly victorious, these two puppets, brought together by the hand of an unknown Fate, met for the last time.

It would have made a strange picture : the elegant room, the drawn curtains, the bright sunlight filtering through, throwing up, in brilliant relief, the emerald green of the Chinaman's petticoats against the cherry-coloured satin of his tunic, embroidered with gold.

Even at that moment, sweating, gasping, suffocating, Dixon noted the design of that wonderful embroidery. The little gold figures, the parti-coloured balls, and the dragons rampant in the corner ! Every detail the same as on the sarcophagus, illuminating the Whitechapel cellar with its royal scarlet and gold.

" I shall never solve that mystery now," said he to himself in a fury of emotion ; " but I was right. They may bury me alive, or they may leave me here to die like a dog, or they may carry me out to China and torture me like a slave, but I was right. That Chinaman in the cellar *was* the man they were after, and this man, whoever he is, belongs to the same family."

The Chinaman stood, with his hands hidden in his sleeves, and stared down at Mortimer Dixon *in extremis* on the floor.

And Mortimer Dixon, to all outward seeming as unconcerned as the Chinaman, gave him back look for look.

The two pairs of eyes—one so blue and one so black, one so sparkling and open, one so secretive and dull—met and held each other, the same arrogance and pride dominating them both.

The appalling heat, his own suffering, what had been, and what was to come, were all forgotten by the man lying gagged and bound on the floor. Not for the first time, his soul rose triumphant in her victory over the flesh. So madly elated was he in that silent battle which took place between him and his enemy that, if his mouth had been freed from the gag, he would have laughed.

" So this is the man who does not only put his head into the lion's mouth," said the Chinaman slowly, " but wants to bite off the lion's head as well ! How does it taste—that lion's head—Mr Mortimer Dixon ? "

So valiant was the Englishman's spirit, he would have suffered the tortures of the damned could he have been able to answer, in his own audacious way, " Very nice."

Helpless as he was, he did the only thing possible. He lay perfectly still and stared back with unblinking eyes into

the Chinaman's face. If looks could have killed, that proud prince of great China would have fallen dead at Dixon's feet.

For a long, long time the two men looked at each other, then the Chinaman clapped his hands.

"Bring me some water and a glass," he said quietly.

Dixon said to himself that just in that same voice he would have given—had it so pleased him—the command to take his life.

"We do not want you to die yet, dear Mr Mortimer Dixon," said the Chinaman. He shifted his head a little as he spoke, and the bright sunlight fell through the parted curtains right across his face.

It was a wonderful face—a face full of wickedness, strength and power. In its perfect immobility it might have been a face of an idol carved out of yellow stone. The black patch stood out on the high cheekbone like a spot of black flame. Dixon, fantastic to the last breath of his body, told himself it was the seal, stamped by Satan, on the countenance of those who had been in hell.

A Chinaman in a blue tunic came forward and knelt with a salver, holding a glass of water, in his hand.

His master made a slight gesture, and in another instant Dixon felt the gag freed from his mouth, his bonds were loosed, and he was sitting upright.

So weak was he, so frightful was the anguish of that relief, he could have screamed aloud. The room whirled round and round before him. Everything went black before his eyes; but that face, like an old ivory statue, shone out across the blackness, and Mortimer Dixon, holding on to himself like a madman, kept hold of his self-control.

Another instant and the glass of water was placed to his lips.

Now, if he had been a character in a melodrama, in a novel, or the hero of a play, he would have proudly pushed aside that life-giving liquid and refused to drink. Being a very human man, with a tongue swollen to double its size, and mad with thirst, he did not do anything so idiotic. He just put his lips to the glass and drank.

The draught was as life-giving as the one the girl had given him when he was in the coffin, but the relief was not the same. In the first place, to swallow was an excruciating agony; in the second, he had only had a tumbler of water

and, to assuage his thirst, he would have required a saltless sea.

Still, when he had finished the contents of the glass, he sat as he was. Neither by word from his silent lips, nor by a petition from his agonised eyes, did he show sign of the fire raging within him, nor demand, by even a sigh, a mercy which he knew, without asking, would have been a joy to his enemy to refuse.

The inscrutable eyes surveying him showed neither amusement nor mockery, neither pity nor disgust. They were blank of all emotion—an enigma, like the face in which they were set. For a time that seemed to his victim like an eternity he stood and watched the gallant man lying at his feet on the floor, then he clapped his hands again, as softly as before.

“One glass is not enough to keep you alive. You must not die yet, dear Mr Mortimer Dixon.”

The high-pitched falsetto voice, so suave, so free of accent, pierced Dixon through and through like the stab of a knife. He would have given all that remained to him of life—it was not much, it is true, but he would have given it all the same—to have satisfied himself by just one word, thrust into that merciless face like a blow from a free man. But he did not. In the first place, it is very much to be doubted whether he could have spoken, so lacerated was his mouth and tongue. In the second place, he was not free. The second draught of water might possibly save his life—at least it would give him strength to struggle when it came to the end. He looked back into the eyes above him, and again his whole soul screamed in an agonised supplication to the Almighty to keep him holding on.

Another glass of water was presented to his lips and he drank it.

Then a third. Then a fourth.

Still the merciless eyes looked on, unmoved at the extraordinary scene taking place before them, and still his victim's unbearable thirst was unquenched.

As he drank the fifth glass, for the first time he tore his eyes away from the Chinaman's.

There were four Chinamen in the room, each on his knees holding an empty glass. In the background, by the door, stood the charwoman holding a jug.

The sight of that comely red face was the hardest thing

Dixon had yet had to bear. He had endured the agonies of cramp; he had gone through the living hell of thirst; he had looked his enemy in the face, and foreseen his own coming destruction, and he had not flinched.

But when it came to the charwoman—the woman who had also striven in her own clumsy way to take his life, the woman whom he had never harmed, the woman whose life he had practically saved, and who, in return, had betrayed him to a living death—then, indeed, Mortimer Dixon had to hold on with a vengeance! He could have shrieked at her like an hysterical girl.

With all his soul in his eyes, he looked at the charwoman, and the charwoman looked back at him. With her stolid, red face she stood there, with a jug in her hand—"The Hebe of Hell," he told himself, with a last flash of his fantastic humour. He had always been noted for his chivalry to women, but, if his hands had been free, it would have given him the most intense satisfaction of his life to have struck her until she screamed.

The Chinaman held up his left hand—such a frail hand, and yet the hand of a master. It was not the great diamond that flashed on the delicate fingers; it was not the great ruby that flashed and glittered on the thumb; it was not the long finger nail encased in a shield of highly wrought gold that attracted Mortimer Dixon's reviving glance. It was the hand itself. The hand of genius. The hand of sin. The hand of a master of men.

The Chinaman held up his left hand, and the charwoman came forward.

Together the two of them, the stolid servant and the inscrutable prince, stood side by side and looked down at Mortimer Dixon. All class distinction of pride and race and possessions bridged over by the passion common to both of them, he told himself—mutual hatred of himself.

"This is the man?"

"Yus."

"You are sure?"

"Yus."

"No one is to come near him. No one is to give him water. No one is to enter this room until I return to fetch him at twelve. You understand?"

"Yus."

This time the Chinaman did not raise his hand; it was

barely the motion of a finger, but the charwoman understood. Without a word, she fell back again to her old position by the door, holding the jug.

“Is your thirst satisfied?” For any emotion that it contained, it was the same voice that, a few hours before, in the exchange of table courtesies, had offered him the salt. “Will you drink more, Mr Mortimer Dixon?”

The Englishman made no answer. He was willing to drink, but not to speak.

Again that fragile hand made a sign and the men supporting Dixon refastened his bonds. The gag was rammed into his mouth, and once more he was a prisoner, helpless as a piece of driftwood cast by an idle hand into the fathomless sea.

Immovable and silent, the Chinaman watched until the binding operation was over, then he turned on his heel and, the four men prostrating themselves on either side of him, he passed between them, quietly, as he had come, and went out of the room. The sight of the bowing Chinamen reminded Dixon of his own exertions in that way. So revived, indeed, was he by the water that, but for the gag, he could almost have found it in his heart to laugh. The four Chinamen, holding their glasses, filed out behind their master, and the charwoman, jug in hand, with equal solemnity, followed them. As she went out of the door she turned her head over her left shoulder, *looked at Mortimer Dixon, and winked.*

There was no mistake about it. No imagination—no desire prompting the belief. Hard, beautiful, glorious fact! *She winked.*

That wink restored life to Mortimer Dixon.

The water had done much for him, but the wink did more. If it meant anything, it meant he was not deserted. If it meant anything, it meant that the bread he had cast upon the waters many days before was about to return to him in different guise—the bread of life, in the most literal acceptance of the term.

The reaction was something extraordinary. Never in all his previous experience—not even when the gilded hands had unclasped themselves and he had come forth out of the coffin—his self-imposed prison-house—*never* had he felt such an elation of soul.

Hunger, thirst, gags and cords—they did not exist any

longer. It is a positive fact that from that moment they did not exist for him at all. They were a mere question of a certain amount of physical discomfort to be prolonged as short a time as possible, and to be endured as best he could. It must be borne in mind that he was young and strong, inured to danger, and that, a few hours before, he had been both rested and well fed. Hence the strain on him was not as great as it would have been on many another man. Against this in his favour, he had gone through a time of terrible nervous excitement, and he had been, for three days, dangerously ill.

All that, however, he refused to consider. His temperament, madly stimulating itself, soared triumphantly above all such insignificant things. That wink to him was as manna in the wilderness, as the land to Columbus, as the first sight of the sun to the blind ! That wink revolutionised the whole of his existence. By that wink he held on. By that wink he swore. By that wink he suffered the tortures of the damned without one second's faltering of the soul.

Strange irony of fate ! That a man of his endurance and genius should depend for his very existence upon a White-chapel charwoman's wink. Yet so it was.

All through that terrible summer afternoon he lay there, bound and helpless, with his eyes fixed on the little clock.

Three o'clock.

Four o'clock.

Five o'clock.

Six.

You know, perhaps, what it is to wait in suspense : for five minutes, ten minutes, half-an-hour, even an hour ! Waiting for the verdict of a doctor on the life of some loved one ; for a telegram to assure you of the safety of someone in danger—for an answer on which hangs your entire life. You know what you suffered during those eternal minutes. Judge then of Mortimer Dixon's suffering by your own !

Six o'clock.

Seven o'clock.

Eight.

The streak of light through the heavy curtains began to dwindle. Still he lost neither heart nor faith. From the moment that wrinkled eyelid closed over that stolid eye, he never doubted what the outcome of the adventure would be. The certainty that he would escape out of the unendurable

position into which his own foolishness had brought him, never left him. His star had not set, it was only obscured.

Once again, as he had said to himself a dozen times before in his mad adventures, Mortimer Dixon's luck held good.

He lay there and watched the light fading through the curtains. The hour of sunset came and went. The hands of the little clock on the mantelpiece crept on, passed the half-hour, went reaching towards nine.

Still he was not afraid.

Nine o'clock.

Half-past.

If it had not been for his belief in that wink, he would probably have died.

At ten o'clock the telephone bell rang madly.

That commonplace shrilling, which he so often cursed in his daily dealings with it in Fleet Street, came to him, across a blackness of thought and feeling, like a voice from God.

It rang. It rang. It rang.

It seemed to Dixon in his agony as if it would never stop.

It seemed to him like the voice of the woman he loved calling on his dead self to arise.

He pictured her to himself, getting more and more excited as no answer came. He remembered his own words to her. "When ten o'clock comes, if I've not turned up, ring for all you're worth." And she had obeyed him.

If ever a woman rang a telephone, the Plump Little Party at Brixton rang her lover up that night.

After a time the bell stopped ringing.

Then came a long pause of unutterable silence. Then the bell rang again. "She's trying another office," he told himself wearily. His head was getting so confused with the darkness, the heat, and the ringing, that he could hardly remember where he was.

Again the telephone bell stopped ringing—and again there was an unutterable pause.

Then a third time . . . a fourth . . .

It shrilled! it shrilled! it shrilled! through the silent darkness! until his nerves were so wrought-up that he could have screamed. He wondered what she was thinking. He cursed himself for what she must be suffering. He tortured himself in a frantic endeavour to guess, receiving no answer, what the girl he loved would do.

That was the climax of agony of Dixon's Gehenna—that she might arrive—so young, so fair, so trusting! Arrive and, being admitted, might be swept away with him in that relentless maw! That, indeed, was too much for him. All that he had endured was as nothing to the frightful anguish of that thought.

In imagination, he heard her ring the door bell. He saw her coming up the stairs. He saw her knocking for admittance and admitted. He saw her conveyed with every courtesy into the adjoining room. He saw her waiting there, in all simplicity, for her lover to come in. He saw the door open and, instead of himself, whom she expected, saw the Chinaman come in. . . .

Human endurance could go no further. For the first time in all those hours of agony he lost his self-control.

He writhed. He tore. He kicked. He did everything that he ought not to have done. At every new sign of his own impotency he writhed and struggled and kicked and tore the more. That madness of despair, well known to every prison warder, fell on him and tore him as a tiger tears at his prey.

He forgot all about his hopes. He forgot all about his star. He forgot all about the wink on which he had staked his life. For five minutes he was a raving madman. The effect of that hideous struggle left its mark on him for the rest of his life.

He could feel his tongue swelling. He could feel the blood rushing to his head as though it would burst. He could hear himself gasping for sheer breath. It was a very delirium of physical agony. The whole of his world seemed to crumble together before him when . . . the charwoman opened the door and came in.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN one hand she held a candle. In the other she held a jug. She shut the door noiselessly behind her and came towards Mortimer Dixon. A glance sufficed to show her the state he was in.

Luckily for him, his rescuer was a woman accustomed to emergencies. It is not for nothing that one has three

husbands from Whitechapel, one a bad drinker, one a Welsh revivalist, and a third subject to fits.

Before he had even realised she was there, she was down on her knees beside him, the gag was out of his mouth and the jug of water was over his head.

That jug of water saved him. The shock was so unexpected and so terrific that, undoubtedly, it saved his reason, if not his life.

Before a word was out of his mouth—much less a cry—she had clapped her apron into his mouth, looking into his face, and winking with both eyes.

“ ‘Old yer tongue, yer fool ! ’ ” she whispered furiously. “ ‘Old yer tongue.’ ” She kept on saying this over and over until finally convinced that he realised the necessity for silence ; then she whipped away her apron and gave his head another bath.

She sat down on the floor, took a huge pair of scissors out of her pocket and cut away at the bonds which held him at the back. He felt one give, and then another. In less time than it takes to tell he was free and sitting up.

This time the reaction was too terrible. Alas for Dixon, brilliant journalist, audacious adventurer ! When he felt those bonds give, he could not help himself : he just sat up, supported in the charwoman’s arms, and cried.

Gods ! how he cried !

First like an hysterical girl, then like a sick woman, then like a blithering idiot, and finally like a strong, strong man. And all the time he cried, the charwoman held him in her fat, red arms, and at every sob she gave him a sip out of the tumbler, and at every gasp she gave him a dash of water in his face. And all the time that this frightful business went on, she rocked him to and fro as she had rocked the Chinaman in the cellar to the same refrain of “ There, there, dearie ! Don’t cry. There ! there ! ” the while Mortimer Dixon laid his head back on her capacious bosom like a child and sobbed himself back to life.

To the end of his days, that strange hour remained with him as one of the most beautiful and curious experiences of his career.

Those strong arms, that tender voice, that capacious breast ! For the time being he was no longer motherless, for Time had set back his clock, the years that were dead had come to life, and he was a child again.

All the time he was sobbing, the charwoman, though he did not realise it, was busy at work. While she patted him with one hand, she released him with the other. When he came to himself, he found that his hands and arms were free. Then she laid him down gently, and still to the same monotonous lullaby, she alternately patted his shoulder and freed his legs.

"There, there, dearie! Don't cry! There, there!"

Under different circumstances it would have been enough to make a cat laugh. To Mortimer Dixon it sounded like the singing of the angels of God.

"It's brandy you wants, pore dear!" With a dexterity almost incredible, she shifted him farther on to the floor. "You lie quiet there, dearie, and 'ave your cry out. There ain't nothing for you to be frightened for! I'm 'ere." She snatched up the empty jug and, noiselessly as she had come, went out of the room.

With returning consciousness, his sense of humour came back. To be so reduced that a fat old lady from Whitechapel had to tell him to lie still and have his cry out, and not be frightened because she would soon be back, were too much for him. He stopped crying, and began to laugh instead.

Ye gods! how he laughed!

He lay there in the darkness, and first he laughed and then he cried; then, all of a sudden he began to curse. The pain in his arms and legs was unbearable. His circulation slowly renewing itself was, if anything, a worse torture than the cramp.

He looked at his legs in helpless anguish. He told himself he should never be able to walk again. As for his hands, they lay where she had placed them, just like bits of wood. There was no power of movement in any of his limbs, no feeling of life, no suspicion of strength, nothing but intolerable pain. So weak was he that it was almost like a cessation of suffering when he heard the charwoman's voice beside him again.

"'Ave a drop of this, dearie!" Again the strong arm was slipped tenderly under his head, and a glass was held to his lips. This time it was strong brandy and water, and Dixon, abstemious as he was, drank it down as though he were the greatest toper alive. It was like drinking liquid life. He felt as if he could have gone on drinking for ever,

but she took the glass away. "No more now, dearie. Just you wait a bit and I'll rub your pore legs. There, there, try and 'old up a bit; 'ere's a cushion for yer 'ead." She slipped a cushion under his head and, turning up his trousers, began to rub his feet and legs.

The touch of her hand was magical—so soothing, so tender, so strong. She told him afterwards that she had been head masseuse at a Turkish bath attached to a hydro, and so had got used to dealing tenderly with wounded and delicate limbs. Be that as it may, she rubbed like an angel, and as she rubbed she kept up a kind of continuous chattering to herself.

"There, there! it'll soon be better! Your pore socks are stickin' to your feet. Nice socks too, silk, ain't they, dearie? Never mind, I'll wash 'em. Just you think of somethin' nice and you'll forget it. There, there. Don't you be frightened. I'm 'ere."

All the time she talked she rubbed. And all the time she rubbed Dixon laughed and cried, and cried and laughed, and drank brandy, and cursed and cursed, and drank brandy again. It was an extraordinary experience while it lasted, but, thanks to that soothing chanting and the unaccustomed stimulant, and the natural buoyancy of his own temperament, it did not last long.

Gradually the helpless, hysterical crying stopped; gradually the interval between each agonising sob got longer; gradually the laughter which was not laughter died away into silence; gradually, too, the excruciating pain of the sluggish blood, regaining its accustomed flow, became bearable. Under the magic of the charwoman's rubbing his hands began to feel as if they were alive again.

There is an old saying that joy never kills. It certainly did not kill Mortimer Dixon. With the sense of returning vigour his belief in his ultimate escape became stronger. The love of life came flowing back into his veins. Hope—that radiant gift of youth—restored him most of all.

"Feelin' better, dearie?" murmured the tender, common voice in the darkness. "That's right. I thought yer did. Don't yer go trying to move yer legs, dearie! just wait a bit longer, just lie still and don't worry! There, there, don't be frightened! It's all right, dearie, I'm 'ere!"

She rubbed on again for a while, patting, pinching, kneading his hands and feet back again to life. Then she caught

up the candle, and tiptoed across the room, and looked at the clock. "'Alf-past ten. It's right, too, I put it by Big Ben."

"Was it *you* who set it going?" he asked feebly.

It was the first words he had spoken since his mouth had been free from the gag, and his swollen tongue and lips almost refused to do their work. It was like hearing another man's voice come out of his own mouth. The sensation was extraordinary. Dixon, true to his calling, registered it for future use. "Was it you who set the clock going?"

"Yes, dearie, I thought mebbe it'd keep you goin' too. It's comfortin' like, 'earing a clock goin' tickety-tack, tickety-tack, when you're alone and in pain."

He stared up at her in amazement. It was his own thought put into words. But how could she, a common charwoman, with her coarse face and her trowsled hair, have gauged so accurately what his feelings would be?

It was a great lesson that Dixon learned as he lay there in the darkness that night—the lesson never to underrate other people's brains. "You thought right," he said, and again his own voice sounded strange to him. "I think that little clock kept me alive."

The charwoman came back and stood beside him, shielding the candle with her hand. "*I know*," she said, nodding her head down at him. "It's all right, dearie, *I know!*"

Dixon thought how Rembrandt would have loved to paint her face—half in darkness, half in shadow—with the amber light shining on the dark masses of her strongly curling, virile hair. As she stood there nodding her head at him, he told himself there was nothing she did not know. What did it matter if she dropped her aitches and scrubbed floors for her living! All the great things of life—the passion of womanhood, the anguish of maternity, the terror of death, and the raging desire of love—all the great things that really mattered were hers. The picture she made stamped itself on his receptive imagination. To him she would stand for womanhood incarnate, the symbol of nature—woman the life-giver—the bearer of sons—the maker of men—to the end of his life.

"'Alf-past ten, dearie. We ain't got long. There's lots I want to tell yer. D'yer think you could listen to me for a bit?"

"I could listen to you for ever," said Dixon faintly, and

this time his voice sounded like his own, but as though he spoke from a great, great distance.

"Then let me put another cushion under yer, dearie, and try to sit up." She whipped a large silk cushion off a chair and, lifting him bodily in her strong arms, she popped it underneath him and raised him up. Strong man as he was, the pain of that first movement was such as to wring a cry from his lips. "There, there, dearie! it 'urts, don't it, but it'll be all right soon. Just you lean against me and keep quiet. Don't you worry, dearie, *I'm 'ere!*" She knelt down on the floor and raised him still higher so that he lay back on her breast.

"Now you just lay quiet and I'll tell yer all yer wants to know."

So the great moment had come. And, as usual, when great moments arrive, so passionately anticipated, so eagerly prayed for, they come in such different guise from what we had expected that they hardly seem great moments at all.

He knew that he now stood on the very threshold of the place which he had sought to find, but his feet, which had been so eager, were still so numb he could not dart with strong impassioned flight to seek for himself that knowledge, but had to be carried into its presence in a charwoman's common arms. He knew that he stood on the threshold of the door of the sanctuary where truth lay hid. He had pictured himself forcing that door open, rending the veil with his strong hands, and tearing Truth out of her hiding-place for himself. Now he lay prostrate in the darkness, and his strong hands, with the life barely throbbing within them, were being chafed back to life while a woman who scrubbed floors for her living gently opened the door.

Yes, indeed, Mortimer Dixon's great moment was very different from what he had expected! It was only owing to his own capacity for recognising the greatness in others that it became a great moment at all. It was a very humble Mortimer who lay on the floor in the darkness and heard the vulgar voice revealing to him the secret of the mystery which, once, in his arrogant way, he had said that he would give his soul to know.

"You mustn't interrump' me, dearie," murmured the charwoman, "for we ain't got long to be together; they'll be back at twelve."

"Who are *they*?" murmured Mortimer Dixon.

“ God knows, dearie ! *I* don’t ! But they’re mighty fine people in their own country, princes wot might have been emperors. So my poor dearie used to say.”

“ You mean your husband, the Chinaman in the cellar ? ”

“ Yes, dearie ; but, yer see, he wasn’t my ’usband at all. ’E was just a lodger in a ’ouse that I used to work for. I never took any notice of ’im special, till one day, when I was there, ’e ’ad one of ’is attacks. I ’elped ’im through, and ever after ’e seemed to cling to me. ’E was such a poor-lookin’ creature, so thin and so ill, I couldn’t ’elp bein’ sorry for ’im. I used to ask ’im how ’e felt in the day, and then I took and did his washin’, and then I took to doin’ his room for ’im, and so it went, bit by bit—you know the way, dearie—until at last ’im and me got talking, and ’e said, if I’d take a little ’ouse and set up a laundry, ’e’d come along and live with me.”

“ You mean the cellar in Whitechapel ? ”

“ Lor’ bless your ’eart, no ! That come a long time after. I’m talkin’ of about a couple of years ago. Well, ’e come and live along ’o me, and I did for ’im. I did the washin’ and ’e used to iron—iron somethink beautiful he did ! Yer never saw the like ! Strite ’e was, too. Told me afore ’e moved in ’e couldn’t marry me, but Lor’ bless your ’eart, I didn’t mind ! I’ve ’ad three in my time, and what with one taking to the drink, and another bashin’ be abart, I was a bit sick of married life. I told ’im I didn’t want no ’usband, but just somebody to look after. Yer see, ’e’d suffered a bit in ’is time same as me, so we just fitted in together. After we’d cleared up, we used to sit an’ talk, and have our bit of somethink together. We was as ’appy as two birds, ’im and me.”

Dixon felt the capacious bosom on which his head was lying throbbing with the recollection of that past delight.

“ As ’appy as two birds, ’im and me.” His vivid imagination reconstructed that picture of domestic happiness. The man and the woman in their humble little home, sitting together after their day’s work, talking over their mutual sorrows ! The one was a great prince, and the other a common drudge, yet he felt sure that the proud aristocrat, an outcast from his own country, had also been as happy as a bird.

It seemed a far call from that picture of simple bliss to the cellar, with the gorgeous coffin in scarlet and gold.

His brain, reviving under the powerful stimulus of the excitement, far more than it had revived under the stimulant of alcohol, strove to find the connecting link between the two.

"I'm glad you were so happy," he said softly.

"Yes, dearie, you may well say it! 'Appy we was, until the day when the trouble came. One day I comes 'ome as usual and finds 'im in an awful state; a regular fantigue he was in. 'E'd seen 'im."

"Seen who?" For the life of him Dixon could not help himself interrupting again.

"The one wot's done this to you, dearie. The one with the rings on his fingers, and the black patch on his cheek."

"Why was your husband so upset at meeting him? Were they enemies?"

"Enemies, with black hate in their hearts towards each other from the day of their birth. They'd 'ave torn each other's 'earts out if they could, but God A'mighty wouldn't let 'em. Yer see, dearie, they was brothers!"

"Brothers!"

"You wouldn't think it to look at 'em, would you? But brothers they was. The same mother bore the two."

Brothers. Still Mortimer Dixon's brain struggled to find the connecting link, but in vain.

"When John 'c told me he was a prince, I was that taken aback yer might as well 'a' knocked me down. At first, I wouldn't believe 'im, then he showed me his corfin, the one yer see in the cellar, dearie. I always knew it was a corfin, same as the other Chinks have, but, till then, 'e'd always kep' it wrapped up. When I seed it, and all those di'monds, and he took and told me who all the pictures was, well, there, I sat down and 'owled. Then John 'e took and told me all about everything. I don't know the rights and wrongs of the story, dearie, but it seems my John did somethink ag'in' the law o' China. Somethink pretty bad, for he had to run for his life. Somethink about politics; bless yer 'eart, I didn't care wot it was! All I wanted was to see 'im in a safe place. John 'e said, now 'is brother had found 'im, e'd 'ave to 'ide somewhere, else they'd catch 'im and send 'im back to China again. Bitter 'ard he took it too, pore dear, sobbed 'is 'eart out, 'e did, that night, same as it might be you."

Dixon's thoughts went speeding back through the dark-

ness of their first interview. He no longer wondered, as he had wondered then, at the impassioned tenderness with which the Chinaman had kissed the charwoman's coarse, red hand.

"John, 'e says to me: 'Leave everything as it is, lovey-dovey,' 'e says, 'we can easy buy new.' It was then that he showed me his money. 'Eaps and 'eaps of it, 'e 'ad. When that was done, he says to me, 'e could always get plenty more. So I just put on a bonnet, and the pair of us walked out, and we pays the rent six weeks in advance, and we puts the coffin on a cab, and off we goes. He wouldn't even let me bring my own teapot, reel silver it was, too, bin in our fam'ly for years. But John, 'e says: 'Don't you worry, lovey-dovey, I'll buy you another.' It went to my 'eart, that teapot did, but 'e thought one teapot was as good as another. Yer see, men never understand."

"No," said Mortimer Dixon, "men never understand."

For a long time there was silence. Dixon knew by the heaving of her bosom that she was crying bitterly. He wondered, were those tears given to the lost family teapot, or were they given to the lack of understanding in men.

"And then, afterwards, you went to the cellar?" he said gently.

"Fust we went to one place, and then we went to another, and then to a third, and before we was 'ardly in, off we goes to a fourth. No matter how we planned, they was always after us. Sometimes we hardly got away in time, so near they was to finding us out."

"It must have been a terrible life for you."

"Not so bad for me as it was for John. Each time we moved 'e 'ad an attack. Howsomever, I managed all right till one day 'e caught sight of 'is brother again, dressed as a common Chink, same as 'im. Then the real trouble began. 'E was that upset he took to the smoke."

"Ah," said Dixon quietly, "opium. That's terrible stuff."

"It's damnable stuff." She stopped rubbing and he felt her hand clench unconsciously on his. "Beer ain't in it when it comes to the smoke. It rots a man's 'eart out, that's what it does. If it hadn't been for that I could 'a' saved 'im. But I s'pose it wasn't to be. Mad for it, 'e was, ravin' mad; but 'e was always kind to me, was John. 'E

never raised 'is 'and to me : that's more than I can say of the other three."

A big tear splashed on to Dixon's face. He took the fat red hand which was giving his life back to him, drew it up to his lips and kissed it, as the Chinaman had kissed it before him. It was the first time he had moved, and the sense of decreasing agony filled him with a fierce joy. He felt like a dead man returning to life.

"Yes," said the charwoman, going back to her rubbing, "it was the smoke wot did it. The smoke and the coffin. It was so big everybody wanted to know wot was inside. John 'e wouldn't leave it be'ind 'im. 'I'm a prince,' 'e says. 'I don't mind 'ow I live, but I'll be a prince when I die,' 'e says. 'We'll take the coffin with us, lovey-dovey, wherever we go.' I knew we was silly, but when 'e said that in 'is queer way and looked at me out of his great, said eyes, I didn't have the 'eart to deny 'im. 'E'd got a way with 'im, yer know. 'E'd just point and say '*Do it,*' and before you know wot you was a-doin' of, there yer was, a-doin' of it. So off we goes to another place. Queer places we was in, too, I can tell yer. We was in with a murderer once—bashed 'is wife's 'ead in, so 'e did, when 'e was in the drink. 'E asks John wot he was 'idin' for. 'E says to John : 'Murder with you too, ain't it, mate?' And John 'e just looks back at 'im and says : 'My poor friend,' 'e says, 'it's more than murder with me.' 'E give that man a fiver, John did, to 'elp 'im try and get away. It was the only time 'im and me 'ad words—about that fiver. 'E'd give a ten-bob piece same as you would a sixpence, and when I blames 'im, 'e'd just smile and say : 'All right, lovey-dovey, we can always get plenty more."

"And couldn't you?" asked Dixon.

"No, dearie, that's wot did us in. When John was in the smoke, 'e didn't know wot 'e did with 'is money, and after 'e see that brother of 'is, 'e was afraid to go to the bank. 'Undreds and 'undreds of pounds 'e said 'e 'ad lyin' there, but wild 'orses wouldn't 'a' dragged 'im there. I'd 'a' gone myself if I'd known where the bank was, but John, 'e never let on about that to no one, not even to me."

"Then how did you live?"

"We pawned things, dearie. 'E 'ad a great big bag which he 'id in 'is coffin. Full of things it was, di'mond rings, and bracelets with green stones and pearls, and rubies,

big as yer thumb-nail. I didn't dare take 'em to the pawnshop; they'd 'a' 'ad me up for stolen goods, so we 'ad to give 'em to a fence! Nicely 'e did us in, too, I can tell yer. *Beast!* Knowin' 'ow we was placed, 'e wouldn't give us as many tanners as they was worth pounds. At last, one fine day, John, 'e comes to me and says: 'Lovey-dovey,' 'e says, 'the bag is empty.' I thought 'e was only jokin', but when I looks it was empty, right enough, except for one thing." She stopped short and Dixon felt a kind of electrical quiver run through her massive limbs.

"Couldn't you sell that?"

"Sell it! John, 'e wouldn't 'a' sold that, not if he was a-dyin'. No, not even for the smoke! 'Lovey-dovey,' 'e says, 'that there is worth all the rest of it put together. It's bin in my fam'ly for 'undreds of years,' 'e says, 'it's magicky. It'll answer any questions yer like to arsk!'"

Mortimer Dixon went hot all over. "What was it like?" he said.

"Nothink extry to look at—dearie; just a dog made of green stone."

"My God!" whispered Dixon. "*The green jade dog!*"

CHAPTER XXXIX

"JOHN, 'e would 'ave it, its eyes was di'monds, but, bless yer 'eart, they wasn't nothing of the sort. Whoever 'eard tell o' puttin' di'mond eyes in a chiny dog! Howsomever, John 'e wouldn't part with it. 'Id it in 'is pigtail, 'e did, and slep' with it under 'is piller at night. Pore dear! 'e needn't 'a' worried hisself! the fence wouldn't 'a' give 'im tuppence for a thing like that."

"But how did you live when the money was gone, and there were no more jewels to sell?"

"I worked," said the charwoman shortly. "I'd been housemaid to Mr Carew's aunt when I was a girl, and it was 'er got me the job with pore Mr Warrington, and after 'e died I was took on by Mr Carew. 'E wasn't no trouble was Mr Reggie. John did 'is shirts up beautiful. I got 'im Miss Margaret's blouses too; so wot with one thing and the other I could just manage to keep the rent o' them cellars going,

and get John his smoke and his bit of food. Dainty 'e was, too. Only eat the best, and only a bite o' that."

She heaved a prodigious sigh, and Dixon thought of the bill at the stores which he had paid with the hundred-pound note. "Tell me what happened at the cellar," he said.

"When I chanced on that cellar," said the charwoman, "I made sure we was safe. Folks around about 'ad it that it was 'aunted, but *I* never see no ghost. It'd 'a' bin all right if it 'adn't been for that girl wot used to type for John."

Dixon's heart stopped beating. At last he was to understand the mystery of the missing girl.

"Pretty young 'ussy, she was, too!" the charwoman said, and her listener, whose ears were so finely attuned to any emotion, gauged the jealousy that had raged at the sight of the beautiful face from the throbbing in the hand that lay in his.

"I 'ated 'er the minute I set eyes on 'er. But John, 'e was that set on 'er, 'e would 'ave 'er, no matter what I said and done. And a rare one on the typewriter she was, that I'm bound to say, like 'er or not. She played on it same as it was a pianner, and John, 'e'd set there, just as if he was talkin' to you and me, and tell 'er wot to say."

"What did he want a typist for?"

"*I* dunno! I used to go up to 'is room pretendin' to be cleanin', but I couldn't make 'ead nor tail of wot 'e was a-sayin'. It was all about secret meetin's—and 'e wouldn't give up 'is ideas for nobody—and ships, and guns, and people goin' out from 'ere to teach 'em 'ow to fight. So much gibberish to me! All *I* wanted to see was that my young madam with her rollin' eyes was actin' right."

"Then he *did* know where she got to?"

"My John?" echoed the charwoman. "No more than the babe unborn! When 'e heard she was gone 'e went on like as if he was mad. *I* thought it was the girl 'e was after, but, bless your 'eart, it was the papers 'e was making all the fuss abart. 'E said if they was found by the right people it'd mean war. 'E went on, so that, though I hated the beastly stuff as much as 'e loved it, I give him the smoke myself to keep 'im quiet. I tried to find out where the girl had got to, surreptitious-like, but nobody couldn't tell me nothink about 'er. The lady who kep' the 'ouse would 'ave it John'd bin that morning and took 'er orf in a cab. But

that couldn't have been true, for I was with 'im all the day. It must have been some other Chink, wot pretended he was John, that come and took her away. They're as like as two peas, unless you know 'em. Why, it took me all my time to know John from the other Chinks wot lived in the same 'ouse with us once. Queer' ouse it was, too, over a restaurant. Now I come to think of it, I shouldn't be surprised if *they* was princes too!"

"And then I came," said Mortimer Dixon.

"Then *you* come! I thought I should 'a' died when I see you a-standin' there askin' of 'im questions. When I see you takin' 'old of 'is pigtail I thought there'd 'a' bin murder! 'E couldn't bear anyone touchin' 'is 'air, excep' me. I used to brush it for 'im, pore dear! Lovely 'ead of 'air 'e 'ad too! Glossy and black and right down to 'is 'eels. I'd sit and brush at it for 'ours—me a-sittin' at the back of 'im, and 'im a-lying of 'is 'ead in my lap, like as it might be you."

Dixon thought of the long black hair, and the white brush in the bag on the drawer handle, and he shuddered. He felt as if he were the basest of traitors, who had, all unconsciously, betrayed the woman who had saved him without a thought of the possible cost to herself.

"Wot with the girl disappearin', and you a-comin', and John, 'is supper spoilt, and John 'im faintin', I thought I should 'a' gone mad that day. Yer know," her voice dropped to a whisper, "when that old Chink doctor said John was dead, I believed 'im, same as you."

"But he wasn't dead?"

"No. Soon's your back was turned he give 'im something wot revived him. We'd 'a' got 'im away, if it hadn't been for Dr Fletcher wot you sent."

"You knew him?" cried Dixon, amazed.

"Course I knew 'im. 'E's the Whitechapel doctor, 'e is. I've 'ad nine in my time, all brought into the world by 'im, and me wot only paid 'im for three. Not that he 'eld that up against me: 'e's too good for that! 'Hullo!' he says, 'it's you, is it? What's up? Another baby to break your 'eart?' At that John 'e opened 'is eyes. 'I'm not a baby, he says, forgettin' all about 'is play-acting—'e could talk English same as you and me, John could, when he liked—but I'll manage to break 'er 'eart.' 'It's a big 'eart,' says the doctor, laughing in his queer way over at me. 'Wot's

the matter with *you*?' he says to John, and John, 'e answers 'im: 'Life,' says 'e. 'That's a complaint we all suffers from,' says the Whitechapel doctor. 'I was 'opin' to earn five bob by saying you was dead. Now I'll likely lose tuppence by sayin' you're alive.' And they two bursts out laughing, and shakes hands, and off goes the doctor. John he turns to me and 'e says: 'Lovey-dovey,' 'e says, 'take me away and 'ide me,' he says. 'It's the last time,' he says. 'Gawd bless yer,' he says kind o' solemn like. 'If I was to have my time over again, lovey-dovey, if they was to offer me a queen, I'd choose you as my wife.'"

Her voice broke, and again Dixon kissed her fat red hand. "Tell me," he said gently, "then, what did you do?"

"I 'id him, dearie," the charwoman answered him softly. "The minute the Whitechapel doctor was gone, the old Chink 'e took me aside and 'e says to me: 'You get your man out of this,' 'e says, 'if yer don't want 'im and 'is brother to meet.' At that I screams out, and John 'e arsk's wot's up. I tells 'im strite out, and John 'e laughs something awful and 'e says: 'You leave it to me, lovey-dovey, we won't be bothered with 'im any more.' So at that I leaves it, and there we waits until 'is brother come—two hours or more it must 'ave bin, for John, 'e was that made for a smoke, 'e nearly died. But 'e held out, and lies there a-sobbin' and a-cryin' and a-talkin' away to hisself like mad. I asked the old Chink wot John was a-talkin' about. 'E's talkin' about a green jade dog,' he says; 'where is it?' 'E says to me: 'I'll give yer ten pounds for that there dog,' 'e says. Likely I'd 'a' give it 'im. I *don't* think! For that matter I couldn't if I'd 'a' wanted to, I didn't know where it was, no more than the dead.

"In the middle of the night his brother comes. 'E'd got on a yeller silk petticoat all over gold, and a bluey-green coat all over di'monds, and 'e'd got a yeller cap on 'is 'ead with a feather out of a peacock's tail, and 'is 'ands was all flashing with di'monds and rubies, somethink lovely! 'Ow 'e come through the streets in Whitechapel dressed in them togs I can't think."

"I can, though," said Mortimer Dixon to himself. "He didn't come through the streets."

"'E come in and stands there in that cellar and looks down at John, and John, 'e opens 'is eyes and 'e says: 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy!' Yus, just like

that. 'You've made your usual mistake,' John 'e says, 'you've come a bit too late.' And with that 'e stops talkin' and 'e rolls 'is eyes somethink awful and 'e drops 'is 'ead on 'is chest and I screams, 'E's dead!' And at that, if you'll believe me, down goes 'is brother on 'is knees, *yus*, in that dirty cellar with all his fine clothes, and he and the old Chink they jabbers away at each other like mad, and they feels John's 'ands, and they opens 'is eyes, and the old Chink, 'e listens to 'is 'eart and nods 'is 'ead, solemn like, and I thinks there ain't no make-believe this time, and I starts 'owlin'. But them two, they starts turnin' John over, and feelin' in 'is pockets, just as if they was thieves, and I calls out shame on 'em. Yus, I did. 'Prince or no prince,' I says, 'I'd take shame to myself to treat a *stranger* like that wot's died, much less a brother.' But they takes no notice of me. They runs and tears open 'is coffin, and the old Chink, 'e puts 'is 'and under the bolster, and 'olds up the blue silk bag. And at that, John's brother, 'e gives a 'owl and 'e snatches it out of the old Chink's 'and, and 'e shoved 'is 'ands in. . . ." She paused dramatically. "Lord! you should 'a' seen 'is fice! If it 'adn't 'a' bin for John bein' dead, I should 'a' laughed. *There was nothink in the bag.*"

By this time, Mortimer Dixon was nearly frantic. He did not dare interrupt her, yet he was so mad to know the end of it all he could hardly hold himself in till she came to the point.

"What did he do when he found the bag was empty?" he asked her, and, try as he would, he could not keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"For a minute 'e stood there still as Lot's wife, then 'e rounds on me, and gets me by the shoulder and shakes me somethink cruel—I 'ad the marks of 'is fingers on my shoulders for days. 'Where's the dog?' he asks me, 'is eyes blazin' out of 'is 'ead. 'Wot dog?' I says to 'im. 'The green jade dog,' 'e says, 'with the di'mond eyes.' 'Is it the green chiny dog you mean,' I says, 'that John was so set on?' 'Yes,' 'e says; 'you've got it.' 'No, I 'aven't,' I says. 'Then where is it?' 'e says. 'I dunno!' I says, 'and wot's more, I don't care,' and no more I didn't. At that 'e takes and shakes me again, and snaps 'is fingers somethink 'orrid! They was so thin it sounded like a skelington a-snappin' of 'is bones. 'E puts his face down into mine and 'e says: 'If yer don't tell me where it is, I'll

kill yer.' 'Kill away,' says I, as bold as brass, 'I don't care,' and no more I didn't, me feeling so lonesome, John being dead. 'She's speakin' the truth,' says the old Chink. And at that John's brother 'e stops a-shakin' of me, and 'e picks up the saucer that we'd 'ad water in and 'e 'olds it up in 'is left 'and, and 'e says some gibberish and throws down the saucer and smashes it, and 'is fice, for all 'is fine clothes, it looked like as if 'e was in 'ell."

Mortimer Dixon gasped. There is nothing more wonderful in the world than to hear the story of a great tragedy told by an illiterate mouth.

"Then 'e claps 'is 'ands soft—that's the Chinese way of callin' the servants, dearie, instead of ringing bells—and two men comes in from the other cellar and bobs up and down. 'E points to John, and they lifts 'im up between them and lays 'im in 'is coffin, and they lays the little lace handkerchief that used to lie under the bolster over his fice, and 'e turns on 'is 'eel, and before I knowed what was 'appenin', 'e was gone! At that I rushes after 'im, meanin' for to give him a piece of my mind, and, if you'll believe me, 'e wasn't there. 'Ow 'e got through that cellar and up them steps, Gawd knows! I don't. It was as if the earth 'ad opened and swallowed 'im up."

In his imagination Dixon could see that figure of splendour and fury vanishing through the unknown door.

"I was that took aback, I thought I was goin' balmy, so I did, when, all of a suddin, I sees the old Chink beckonin' of me, quiet like, and I goes back. 'They're comin' to fetch 'im at twelve to-morrow night,' 'e says to me, 'you've twenty-four hours to do it,' 'e says, 'but if I was you, I'd 'ide 'im quick.' 'Wot's the good of 'idin' 'im,' I says, 'e's dead.' 'No, 'e ain't,' says the old Chink, and 'e takes the lace handkerchief off John's face, and there lies John with 'is black eyes wide open. 'Wot!' I screams out, 'you ain't dead, John!' 'No, I ain't,' John 'e says, a-sittin' up in 'is coffin. Then 'is face goes all queer like. 'But 'e's put the curse on me, lovey-dovey,' 'e says, 'that's wot my brother's done! 'E's put the curse on me, and there's no gettin' away from that.' 'Curse be jiggered!' I says to John, 'you come out of it!' and the old Chink and me, we 'elps 'im out, and we shuts down the coffin lid, and John 'e says somethink to the old Chink, and 'e bobs up and down, and goes away, and we two was left alone."

"Poor soul!" murmured Dixon tenderly. "It must have been pretty awful for you."

"It was 'ell. The minute we was alone, John 'e 'as one of 'is attacks. 'E sobs and cries and catches 'old of me, frightened out of 'is life. ' 'Ide me!' 'e says. ' 'Ide me, quick! If 'e finds I'm not dead, 'e'll tear my 'eart out! 'Ide me, for Gawd's sike, afore 'e comes."

"What did you do?" Mortimer Dixon was so excited he could hardly breathe.

"I 'id 'im." The charwoman answered him simply. Like all remarkable natures, when it came to the great elemental passions, she was as simple as a child.

"Hid him, where?"

"I 'id 'im," she repeated slowly, and, though her voice had not changed, and her hand on him was as tender as ever, Dixon felt as if she were a great lady and he a prying impostor, and she had shut the door, through which he was peeping, in his face.

For a while there was a silence between them. Dixon could feel the heavy throbbing of her heart under his cheek, as he lay on her breast. He felt the pulsing of her hand as she continued her mechanical rubbing. He imagined, though he could not see, the anguish of her eyes.

"Yes," said the charwoman slowly, "I 'id 'im. For ten mortal days I 'id 'im. 'E was in the smoke, on and off, all the time. I couldn't do nothink with 'im, but some'ow or other I managed it. I'd have broke down altogether if it hadn't been for you."

"For me?" said Dixon, amazed.

"You was so bright and cheery, I took to yer the first moment I set eyes on yer, though I was so mad with yer for comin' pokin' after John. You was so kind to me in the kitchen that first mornin', and as for that business, when I 'arf poisoned yer . . . why, I might 'a' bin put in prison if it hadn't been for you!"

"Nonsense," said Mortimer Dixon, though in his heart of hearts he knew it was true.

"It ain't nonsense," said the charwoman stoutly. "It's gorspel truth. But, as I told yer before, I didn't mean for to 'urt yer! When I come in and see you a-lyin' there so white and 'elpless, strite, I was that took back I could have fell down dead. Next mornin', when the doctor turns on me and you says 'She's the dearest old soul in the world!'

well, that fair did me in ! I'd 'a' laid down my life for yer, so I would."

"You're running a pretty good chance of proving your own words," said Dixon, with something of his old gay way. "If that man you call the prince comes back at twelve, as he said he would, and brings enough people to help him, there won't be much chance for you or me."

"That's all right," said the charwoman quietly. "Don't you be frightened, dearie ; you just lie there. *I'm 'ere.* You trust yourself to me."

He told himself in a kind of agonised impotence that the precious moments were slipping by and that, though he had heard much, there was still much left for him to hear. For the life of him he could not keep silent any longer. Now he was coming to himself, he was the same old Dixon, impetuous and ardent, mad to get to the root of everything as quick as he could.

"Look here !" he said, clutching at the kindly hand, still mechanically rubbing him, "don't you worry about me any longer. I'm ever so much better. You must have tired yourself out rubbing me like this. Whether we get out of this or whether we don't, I want to say one thing, while I've a chance to say it—I don't care if your John's a thief, or a murderer, or a criminal, after what you've done for me, I'll stand by you. I'll help you to hide your John."

"God has done that for me already, my dear," said the charwoman solemnly—"my John is dead."

In the darkness Dixon felt the hot, passionate tears falling like rain on his face ! That finished it. He forgot his own pain, he did not stop to think that now he could never fulfil his proud boast, made in that strange hour in Fleet Street, when he had sworn to that great man whom he so idolised, that, come what would, he would bring the Chinaman to his feet. All thought of his own triumph, his worldly advancement, and the fulfilment of his ambition, went from him. For the time being there was only one thing in the world for him to do, to comfort the poor soul who had, in his hour of need, comforted him. Disregarding the pain, he reached up in the darkness and drew the coarse, red face down to his own. "Poor old dear," he said gently, "I'm so sorry." He kissed her coarse, wet cheek.

So once again in this most wonderful world the impossible was made possible, and, between these two fellow-

creatures, where there had once been only hatred and suspicion, as by a miracle, there was nothing left now but trust and love. For love has queer ways of showing itself. We take the word on our lips solemnly when we speak of the passion of mother for child, of man for woman, and of woman for man. We take it on our lips lightly when we speak of the transitory sentiment we bestow on a pretty face, or an engaging child ; but when it comes to the great mysteries of life, then should we speak of it with bated breath, for it is a miracle of God.

Under such conditions, Love is a holy word.

Into that magic circle, Mortimer Dixon had entered, hand in hand with a red-faced, vulgar, elemental child of nature, who combined in her own strong personality the loyalty of bygone days, the temper of a fiend and a heart of gold. They clung together in a kind of agony, which would have been incomprehensible to any onlooker, but which appeared, at the moment, quite natural to themselves.

Then the charwoman got up, and taking the little candle, which stood flickering beside her on the floor, she disengaged herself from Dixon, and laid him gently down on the cushions and looked at the clock.

"It's 'arf-past eleven." There was terror in her voice and, as she came back, he could see there was worse than terror in her eyes.

"You won't mind my leavin' you alone for a minute, dearie ? "

He looked at her. "What are you going to do ? "

"I ain't a-goin' to take no risks ! John, 'e told me a thing or two about his brother. 'E ain't the saint e' seems. 'E's 'ad 'is knife into John, and, now, it's my turn to 'ave my knife into 'im. Once you lay your hands on 'im, yer can get any money yer like ! "

Mortimer Dixon was horrified. "That's not my way of doing business, I'm afraid," he said shortly.

The charwoman whipped round on him as if he had struck her. "And what else is it you've been trying to do all this time ? " she cried. "You've been looking 'ard enough for 'im, all these weeks, 'aven't yer ? "

"No, my dear soul, I've been looking for your John."

The charwoman laughed bitterly. "That's where you're mistook, dearie. It ain't my John as you're after, it's 'is brother ! "

Before he knew what he was doing, Dixon had got to his feet. Reeling, gasping, he advanced on her like a madman, clutching at her wrist. "Is that true?" he whispered.

"Of course, it's true."

"How do you know?"

"John told me so, dearie. 'There's goin' to be 'ell in my country, lovey-dovey,' he says to me; 'crowns fallin' and thrones toppin' and blood runnin' down the streets like rain. They think it's *me* wot's started it all,' e says, 'and they're turnin' the world upside down to find me, but it's my brother they're after,' e says, 'if they did but know the rights of it. I dabbled my finger-nails in it,' says 'e, 'but 'e's up to the mouth and over, it's *'im* wot's done this thing,' e says—'not *me*.'"

The effect of her words was stupendous. It seemed to Dixon as if scales had suddenly fallen from his eyes. "My God!" he cried, "what a fool I've been."

The charwoman looked at him in her queer, shrewd way. "Yes," she said dryly, "you 'ave bin a bit of a fool!"

"Why," cried Dixon, "I've had him in my hands three times! I've run away from him! I've dined with him and I've let him go." He lurched forward. "And he's coming back here to-night?"

"If it 'adn't 'a' bin for 'im comin', I'd 'a' got you out of this long ago, even if I'd 'ad to carry yer on my back," snapped the charwoman.

"Oh, you angel!" cried Dixon, in an ecstasy of delight. "How can I ever thank you! If only I can bring this off, you've made me your slave for life."

"You wait till you're a bit stronger, to thank me, dearie. You can hardly stand, poor dear!"

It was true. As the flare of excitement died down, he realised how weak he was. His pulses racing and his heart in his mouth, he let himself be guided into a chair as if he were a sick child.

"There, there! dearie," said the soothing voice, "don't you worry! It's all right! I'm 'ere."

The situation was too excruciatingly funny. Dixon began to laugh.

The charwoman, anxiously surveying him, picked up the candle from the floor, set it on the table, and slipped a cushion behind his head. "You just rest there, quiet, till I come back." She went towards the door.

"Where are you going?" he gasped.

"To fetch 'elp. I promised John afore he died there shouldn't be no uproar, but 'all porters ain't the same as the perlice."

"Better bring the one belonging to the other flats as well."

"The liftman might be useful," the charwoman returned dryly. "I'll bring 'im up too. I sha'n't be gone more than a minute." She went to the door and turned the handle. Then she stopped as if she had been turned to stone.

"What's the matter?"

The charwoman turned and faced him. Her face was white. Her eyes were panic-stricken. She tried to speak, but her voice failed her.

Realising that something terrible had happened, he staggered to his feet, and holding on to the table in front of him repeated his question. "What's the matter?" he gasped.

The charwoman came back a few steps and looked at him. "*The door is locked,*" she said.

"The door locked!" cried Mortimer Dixon and, for the first time, it seemed to him that his voice was his own again.

"'Ush!" the charwoman put her finger to her lips, and came tiptoeing across the room to him. "They must 'a' seed me come in! They must 'a' left me alone on purpose. It struck me as funny they didn't leave anybody to keep an eye on me. Still I kep' on sayin' I 'ated you worse than poison; and they knew I'd given you the smoke stuff in yer soup."

"How did they know that?" he asked, eager, even in this new extremity, to make sure of his facts.

"I told 'em. I said if they didn't believe me, they could ask the doctor downstairs. If it 'adn't been for that, they wouldn't 'a' left you and me all by ourselves in the flat alone! Oh, my Gawd!" she cried, "now wot are we going to do!" She began to shake and tremble, and her face, in the flickering candlelight, had gone ashen white.

The sight of her restored Dixon to himself more than anything else in the world could have done. He put his arm round her heaving shoulders and, instinctively, his young body began to reassert its own strength again. "It's for me to tell you not to worry, now," he said, and the ghost of his own sunny smile seemed to shine out at her again. "Whatever they do to me, they sha'n't hurt you."

“ ‘Ow can *you* ’elp it, dearie ! Oh, wot a fool I was not to nip downstairs right away and get ’elp ! ” She clasped her hands together in a kind of frenzy. “ I was that upset, knowin’ the state you was in, I couldn’t rightly make up my mind what was best to do, and, now, instead of ’elpin’ you, I’ve only made things worse.”

“ Nonsense ! I’m not afraid of them now that I am free.”

“ ‘Ow long do you suppose you’ll remain free ? ” retorted the charwoman in her shrewd way. “ I tell yer, there’s not a chanst for us.” The huge tears rolled down her cheeks. “ Yer don’t know them Chinks as *I* do. They’d as lief kill yer as look at yer ! ”

“ Well, they’re not going to kill me, and they’re certainly not going to kill you. There’s nothing for you to alarm yourself about, my dear soul. I’ll just telephone down to the hall porter, and all that locked door will mean is, that it will save you the stairs.”

“ Wotever are you talkin’ about ! Why, that telephone’s been out of order for the last twelve hours.”

“ Then it’s in order now,” said Dixon, dragging himself to the table, “ the bell rang like mad an hour ago.”

“ Yes, the bell rings, right enough,” said the charwoman, “ but yer can’t ’ear wot the people are a-sayin’ of, and the people at the other end can’t ’ear you.”

“ Bosh ! ” said Dixon, seizing the telephone.

“ I wish it *was* bosh ! ” the charwoman cried ; “ but it ain’t. I spoke to the men abart it yesterday and that’s wot they told me. They said we’d ave to put up with it till to-morrow. Much good to-morrow’ll be for us ! ” she sobbed wildly. “ Oh, my Gawd ! Why didn’t I go and get ’elp while I ’ad the chance ! ”

“ Stop that ! I can’t hear what they’re saying.”

“ No, nor won’t,” she sobbed ; “ not if you was to set there all night.”

Mortimer Dixon rang, and rang, and rang, but, as the charwoman had predicted, there was no reply. At one time he thought he heard a faint murmur, but the words were quite undistinguishable, nor was he certain whether it was a mere mechanical buzzing or the vibrations of a human voice. “ What’s the time ? ” he asked over his shoulder.

“ A quarter to twelve.”

“ And they said they were coming at twelve ! ”

He went over, and picking up the brandy, poured some into the glass, took a good drink himself, and held it out to her. "Have a drink," he said briefly, "take all you can, for you'll need all your strength."

The charwoman took the glass and drank it off as if it had been water. "Wot are you goin' to do?"

"Break down the door. Come on! Put your shoulder to it and, between us, we'll get it down."

The charwoman put the tumbler down on the table and shook her head. "Not if you was twenty times the man you are, you couldn't move it an inch. Them doors aren't none of your jerry-built stuff. They're solid ma'ogany throughout."

"At least we can try. Come on!"

The pair put their shoulders against the door, and they pushed and they shoved, and they shoved, and they pushed for all they were worth. It did not budge an inch. In his weakened condition, he had no desire to waste what little strength he had. It did not take him more than a minute to realise the futility of trying to get out by *that* means. "Give me a hairpin," he said to her.

"I ain't got one, dearie, me 'avin my 'air short. Wot are you goin' for to try now?"

"Pick the lock."

"The key's in the other side. You can't pick *that*!"

"You're precious good at finding ways how *not* to get out," he snapped at her furiously. Then he held out his hand to her as he knelt by the keyhole, and apologised: "Don't mind what I say, old dear, my nerves are all on end."

For answer, the charwoman let go of his hand, collapsed into a chair, and burying her face in her arms, began to sob.

"For God's sake, stop that crying!" Dixon jumped to his feet. "You'll drive me mad. Look here, it's perfectly ridiculous thinking we can't get out of this room. I know! You take off your petticoats and we'll tear them into pieces, knot them together, and I'll let you down through the window. You can get in through the balcony on the next floor."

The charwoman lifted her tear-stained countenance. "There ain't no balcony on this side of the 'ouse."

"Damn," said Dixon.

He felt like a caged lion. Bad enough when he was bound and helpless, but now he was free and nothing to stop him,

it nearly drove him to frenzy to think that he could not find a way out.

It was an extraordinary situation.

Here they were, an Englishman and an Englishwoman in a fashionable flat, in a fashionable part of London, a telephone on the table, and a lift outside, and a hall porter downstairs, and as much prisoners, for all the help they could get, as if they were on a desert island.

Mortimer Dixon recalled the many times he had demonstrated the impossibility of such a situation arising outside story-books and theatres, and he realised with bitterness that nothing is impossible in this world.

With a sudden inspiration he fell on his knees, calling to the charwoman to do the same. "Get the poker and the tongs," he said, "and let's bang for all we're worth."

Again the charwoman shook her head in the same persistent, despairing way, "Yer can bang till Doomsday, dearie, they won't 'ear yer."

"Why not?"

"The family went away for their holiday last week."

"But there are servants in the place, aren't there?"

"No, dearie; they've got a place down in the country of their own, and they take their servants with them every year."

"Look here, if you think I'm going to sit here and be caught like a rat in a trap you're mightily mistaken, for I'm not. I'll jump out of that blooming window first."

"You'd only smash yourself to pieces, dearie; and wot good'd that be to yer?"

Dixon sprang to his feet with a positive scream of disgust. "My God," he cried, "what a fool I am! I'd forgotten all about the trapdoor. I must be mad or drunk, perhaps both, not to have thought of it before."

"'Ow on earth are you going to get up, dearie; we ain't got no steps."

"Steps be damned! Here, don't stand there drivelling, give me that chair." He dragged the writing-table under the panelling in the ceiling where the trapdoor was, and pushed the things on one side. He signed to her to put the chair on the table. "Come on!" he cried. He clambered on to the table, and held out his hands.

"I'll never be able to get up there, dearie, you must go and leave me behind."

"Twice," said Mortimer Dixon. "Come on!"

Puffing and panting, the charwoman got her great bulk on to the table, and they stood there together.

"Wait a minute," said he. "I'll get the poker." He slid off the table, got the poker, clambered back on to the table, and banged at the trapdoor.

"Thank goodness this trapdoor isn't locked!" he said to himself, for it was as much as he could do to reach it as it was.

The trap, eased as it had been the day before, gave way at the second push and, in less than a minute, he could see the star-strewn night shining through. He put the poker softly on to the floor, and told the charwoman to get up on to the chair. "Get up in front of me," he said, "I'll hold you." But this she refused to do. "Then I'll get down, and you get up, and I'll steady the chair. Come on."

No sooner said than done. In less time than it takes to tell, the charwoman, in an agony of clutching and scrambling, had hoisted herself up on the chair.

"Now put up your arms," he said holding her round the waist, "and see if you can touch the trapdoor."

She tiptoed to her utmost stretching capacity, but she was at least four inches too short.

"Stand tight, I'm coming!" Before the charwoman realised what he was doing, he stood behind her on the chair. "Now listen to me," he said quietly, and his voice was very grave, "I'm pretty strong, but I'm not in my best form, as you can guess after what I have gone through, but if you do as I tell you, when I tell you, and how I tell you, I can get you out on to the roof. Both of our lives may depend on this for, come what may, I will *not* leave you behind."

"I knows that," whispered the charwoman.

"Then don't you be a fool! I'm going to put my arms round your waist and give you a hoist. Take a deep breath, and when I say 'go,' you grab for all you're worth."

"I'll fall," said the charwoman, "and it'll be no light fall neither."

"You *won't* fall, for the moment you grab at the trap, I'll grab at your legs."

"We'll both of us be smashed to pieces."

"Bosh!" said Dixon, who thought it most likely.

“Come on! It’s that or the Chinks, remember, and, of the two, it’s better to be smashed!”

The words acted like magic. For, even as he spoke, he felt her whole frame stiffening almost to rigidity. He knew that the critical moment had come and he seized it for all he was worth. “*Grab!*” he cried, and he shoved her off the chair.

Grab she did. In another second she was swinging in mid-air.

Like lightning he seized her legs below the knees, and shoved her up through the trap. “Pull yourself up!” he cried. “Damn it, woman, pull yourself up!”

It was like raising a mountain. How he managed it he never knew, but manage it he did. In another second he had seized her feet and put them on his shoulders. For a moment the great unwieldy frame swayed wildly, then it disappeared. Not a minute too soon, either. The chair, which had been creaking and cracking under their combined weights, gave in the back leg, and down Mortimer Dixon went.

Crash!

It was not his fall that troubled him. It was not he who had any bones broken, but the chair.

His eyes snapped round the room in search of another. Chairs there were in plenty, but they were all too big to stand on the table.

It didn’t need anyone to tell him that his chance of escape was gone.

He was not telling that to the charwoman, however. The sight of her red face looking through the opening in the ceiling, and her horrified voice asking him where he was, was too much for his sense of humour. He sat on the floor and laughed, not the hysterical laughter of an hour ago, but the exuberant laughter of a boy.

All said and done, what did *he* care! It was only a question of a few minutes, and help would arrive.

Communication had been established with the outside world, and long before twelve his prison doors would be opened and he would be free.

“Wotever are you a-settin’ there for and laughin’?” croaked the charwoman.

He laughed harder than ever. “At you!”

“Wot’s the matter with *me*?”

" You look so funny staring down through there."

" Ain't yer coming ? "

" Yes, in a minute. You get along to the next flat and bang on the trapdoor for all you're worth. Scream if they don't hear you."

" Supposin' they don't open it ? "

" They'll open right enough. Miss Dalrymple'll think it's me."

" You ? "

" Oh, for God's sake, don't stand there talking ! " said Dixon who, under any circumstances, would not have found it easy to explain what he had just said. " You go along and do as I tell you, and I'll come after you in a minute. Before you go, just throw me down my boots."

" Your boots ? "

" Aren't they there ? " said Dixon.

" Yes, I've got 'em. Wotever's your boots doin' up 'ere ? "

He laughed harder than ever. " I expect they walked in their sleep. Let 'em down gently, poor dears."

Holding them by the laces, the charwoman lowered them through the roof.

The sight of his immaculate, patent-leather, evening-dress boots dangling through the trapdoor finished him. He could not have helped it if it had been his last moment. As they dropped tenderly on to the table, he laid his head in his hands, and laughed till he thought he would have died.

CHAPTER XL

WHEN he looked up, the charwoman had gone. Dixon left off laughing, and heaved a prodigious sigh of relief. She was safe, at all events, no matter what happened to him.

" That's something to the good, anyway," he said to himself. " Now what remains for me ? It'll take that poor old dear three minutes at least to rouse them up, and it may take that little girl at least two minutes to wake them up downstairs. Three and two's five ; add three for the hall porter and the liftman to get up here, that makes eight " ; he looked at the clock ; " even at that rate, which is about

twice as long as it ought to take, I'm four minutes to the good."

That settled to his own satisfaction, he did not give the matter another thought. Where other men would have worried themselves frantic over things that would never happen, Dixon—shaken though he was with all he had gone through—was still sufficiently himself not to create difficulties where there were none, or to worry about miseries he might never be called upon to go through.

He considered he had gone through quite enough already. He believed firmly in the Divine justice of things, and it seemed to him he had paid dearly enough to deserve whatever good he might be going to get. The excitement and the unaccustomed alcohol had so far restored him that, for the time being at all events, it mitigated the effect of the strain and the shock to his nerves.

It was a calm and alert man who sat on the study floor, and reached out a lazy hand to put on his patent-leather boots. The mere way he did them up, proved to his own satisfaction that, though it might take weeks to repair the actual damage done to his nervous system, from a doctor's point of view, he could stand any little extra strain that might be in store for him, now he was free.

Free!

That was the whole secret of Mortimer Dixon's lack of fear. He was imprisoned in that room, it is true, and he would, undoubtedly, be at the mercy of men who would have no mercy on him, if he was not rescued in time. But as long as he was free to move about he could bear anything. It was only when he was confined in the coffin and knew that he could not get out; it was only when he was lying bound hand and foot and could neither move nor scream, that his nerve had failed him. Given a fair fight, he had no nerves at all.

So he sat on the rug and put on his patent-leather boots. He laced them deftly, and tucked in the tags, with quite as much precision as if he had been going out to dine. Seeing a spot on the toe of one boot, he took out his handkerchief and rubbed it bright. He was contentedly rubbing away at his boot when, suddenly, a faint wave of the smell he so hated seemed to float into the room. It arrested his attention instantly. He stopped rubbing and looked round, as though the perfume were an actual living presence. Perhaps

he was unduly sensitive to it, but every man has his own particular weakness, and this uncanny atmospheric condition was Dixon's.

Under the impetus of that overwhelming sensation, he got to his feet.

It was only when he caught sight of himself in the mirror on the wall, with his head thrown back, sniffing in the air, that he realised how potent that invisible influence was.

All through the case, ever since he had taken it up, this smell seemed to have pursued him. It seemed to him it had identified itself with the mystery that he had in hand. Wherever he had gone, whatever he had done, he had never been actually free from it, from the time he had gone down the steps in the Whitechapel cellar to the hour when he stood there alone in the flat.

Alone in the flat.

Oddly enough, it was then that it first occurred to him that he was alone in the flat. Also, that he was alone in the room, where the man who had lived there before him had taken his own life.

"The Fatal Room," as Dixon always called it to himself. The room which, when he first entered the flat, had seemed to seize on his psychic consciousness with an undeniable force.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, the sense of horrible apprehension he had experienced before in the study fell upon him again. The strong man who had lain bound and gagged, enduring an agony of physical distress without fear, suddenly was horribly afraid. He could not have told you what he was frightened for. He cursed himself for a fool for being frightened. Yet the fact remains, he was afraid.

To distract his thoughts, he went to the wall to turn up the electric light. The switch turned in his hand, but no light came. He looked at the four brass fittings and saw, to his dismay, that the bulbs had gone. He remembered, on the instant, that he, himself, had complained of the ones in the dining-room and the charwoman had changed them for those out of this room. His eyes went sharply to the candle. There was not more than half-an-inch left, and it was not a thick candle. It was one from the kitchen, and made of tallow. His subconscious brain registered the fact that tallow burns quicker than wax.

He rushed at once to the arm-chairs and vainly began

endeavouring to pile them one on the top of the other. Had he been asked the reason for that sudden passion of activity, his explanation would have been a plausible one: he felt it wiser to get out of the flat. But the explanation, though plausible, would not have been the true one. It was that he did not want to be left alone in that room in the dark.

He looked at the clock. It was now eight minutes to twelve. If his conclusions had been correct as to time, he had only another four minutes to wait. The candle undoubtedly would last that time. He went to the window, drew the curtains and looked out.

The window was a bow, round which was built a cushioned window-seat. The window itself was made of leaded panes of glass. The clasp of the middle one was snapped off right up to the fastening. Impossible to open that one. The side windows, according to the idiotic custom of some architects, were not made to open at all. "If I smash every pane in the whole damn' thing," he said to himself furiously, "the lead frame would remain firm. If it was a matter of life and death, I could not get out."

"A matter of life and death!"

Supposing it were!

He turned his head and looked at the clock.

It was seven minutes to twelve.

Three minutes still to wait.

He looked at the candle.

Its appearance had sensibly altered. The tallow ran in thick drops down the side of the candlestick. It was fast reaching the guttering stage.

If anyone had offered Dixon five hundred pounds or an electric light, he would have chosen the electric light.

He stood at the window and looked out at the sky. It was dark, and the thick clouds were moving fast. The intermittent moon showed her face in the far-away heavens like a pale ghost of her radiant self.

He caught himself wishing with all his strength that this particular happening had come to him in the garish light of day. Instinctively, his eyes went back to the clock.

Six and a half minutes to twelve.

Two and a half minutes more of this nerve-racking imprisonment left.

Conscious of his undue excitement, he pulled himself together, and determined to distract himself with a book.

Shielding the flickering candle with his hand he set it on the table, and went to the bookcase which ran round three corners of the wall. It was locked.

"The place might be a prison," he said aloud angrily. Then he stopped short, for his own voice sounded strange in the silence. To all intents and purposes, as far as he was concerned, a prison it was.

He turned his head sharply and looked over his shoulder, into the shadowy darkness.

The clock was six minutes to twelve.

"Ye gods! but I'm a blithering ass! I won't look at that blessed clock again." He pulled forward a chair and plumped himself into it, with his back to the clock. It was only after he had sat down that he realised he was sitting in the chair where the man who had sat there before him had cut his throat.

A feeling of horror swept over the young journalist. But he did not stir. He swore to himself that he would not get up from that chair any more than he would look at the clock.

"These things are good for training the nerves," he said to himself; "even allowing a good percentage for overstrain, I ought not to be like this. If anything's going to happen to me, then let it happen. Better I were dead than a coward like this. I'm jolly glad it's happened. It'll do me good to sit still here and wait!"

So, not for the first time in his life, Mortimer Dixon sat and waited. And as he waited, the apprehension which had seized on him grew stronger and stronger and stronger.

He looked at the trapdoor, and, in his imagination, peopled it with strange faces looking down and laughing at his misery.

He looked over at the thick curtains enshrouding the windows and imagined sinister presences standing behind them, waiting to spring out on him if he attempted to move.

Not a sound from the outside world came to him, except the wind moaning uneasily around the chimney-stacks. As far as the ordinary things of life went, he might have been the only surviving soul in a city of the dead.

In an access of nervous irritability, he pulled open the drawer of the writing-table and took out some paper, selected a pen, and opened the ink-bottle. As he did so, his dream, as he lay outside on the balcony on that summer afternoon,

came back to him with an acuteness of sensation that was like physical pain.

In his dream, even so, he had sat in the dead man's chair. Even so had he opened the drawer and laid the paper ready to write. Even so had he lifted the dead man's pen and dipped it in the dead man's ink.

A kind of horror swept over him, yet he sat on, and in his fertile imagination he reconstructed that hideous scene.

He pictured the poor driven soul coming into his study and locking the door behind him. He pictured him as a fair tall man, with blue eyes burning out of his white face.

Dixon looked up and caught sight of his own face looking back at him out of the mirror. *He* was a fair, tall man, with blue eyes burning out of a white face.

He told himself that Warrington had probably dined out that night, and on his way home had made up his mind to kill himself. He must have come straight to his study, just as he was, dressed in his evening clothes.

Odd that *he*, Dixon, should have evening clothes on too!

His thoughts, morbidly alive, showed him the fated man seizing the brandy bottle from the dining-room, and drinking it as if it were water, to nerve him for what he had to do.

Dixon looked at the bottle and tumbler from which he had taken his own copious libations. Odd, that in real life, coincidence should sometimes hold so extraordinarily good.

For a moment Dixon's thoughts wandered.

It seemed to him as if he had been sitting there for an eternity. So engrossed had he been in that fantastic projecting of himself into the drama of the dead man that he had literally forgotten the terror of his own life drama, on which, in a few minutes, if help did not come, the curtain might also be rung down.

He wondered what the time was.

He gave a little shiver. He longed intensely to look at the clock, but he had promised himself not to do so, and he clung to that promise as, in the hour of danger, a savage might cling for safety to his fetish of wood and stone.

He centred his thoughts with feverish activity once again on the dead man.

Yes, he had come in from dinner; he had seized the brandy; he had gone into the study and locked the door. He had drunk deeply of the fiery spirit which, at such hours, is the only friend on which a man may rely for help. He had

gone to the windows and drawn the curtains, even as Dixon had, and looked out for the last time on the glory of the night.

Dixon's imagination pictured just such a night to him. Racing moon, racing clouds, and—outstripping them all—with his black horses shod with flame, racing Death, whirling his chariot across eternity to fetch his predestined tribute, now due to him, the life of this unhappy man.

It came to him, as if he, himself, had witnessed the awful deed, that Warrington had killed himself when the clock struck twelve.

The end of man's day.

The beginning of man's night.

He pictured the doomed man taking out his watch and consulting it, and turning his head, mechanically comparing it with the clock.

Before he knew what he was doing, Dixon had looked over his shoulder.

It was two minutes to twelve.

Two minutes to twelve! And he had reckoned, without fail, even giving liberal chances for accident, that his rescuers would be with him two minutes before. What had kept them! Why didn't they come! What would happen if they failed him!

He felt the burning of his body suddenly go ice cold.

So must the burning of that other body have chilled, when Warrington had looked at that little clock. The knowledge must have come upon him then that he had only two minutes left to live.

It seemed to Dixon as if the eyes of his imagination, suddenly endowed with divine light, plunged themselves down into the heart of the unhappy man. It was like looking into chaos—a chaos of black despair through which red flame went speeding; the resolution to end this agony, to plunge head foremost into the abyss of everlasting night.

It is an awful thing to look into the heart of a man who is about to take his own life.

Only two minutes to live.

Dixon could see the trembling hands clutching at the pen, dipping it in the ink, and writing the last lines his pen would ever write. Piteous explanations; abject remorse; cries for love that had been withheld; cries, perhaps, for revenge, that he had been given so little, where he had given so much.

Curses for the living ; piteous prayers for the dead. And then the last line of all ! the whole of life epitomised in that one cry of the departing soul, "*Now the end has come.*"

Dixon's dream came back to him in a wave of terror. Those were the very words he had seen written on the paper as he woke from sleep.

"*Now the end has come.*"

He looked down on the paper that he had taken out of the drawer.

There, in the centre of the page, the words which he had seen in his dream stared back at him. "*Now the end has come.*"

In the corner of the left hand was a small lozenge in scarlet, containing a golden "W." It was paper which had belonged to the dead man.

Dixon stared, and stared, and stared at it, as if he could not believe his eyes. Was it born of his own vivid imagination ? Was it an optical illusion, creation of the fever raging in his veins, or was it an actual fact, materialised out of the spiritual communication which he had, of his own free will, endeavoured to establish between himself and the dead man.

He pulled himself together sharply and took the paper up. It was thick. It was rough. The surface of the corner where the monogram glittered was uneven to his touch. No optical illusion there. No materialised spirit of monograms come back from another world. His common-sense, coming alertly to his aid, showed him at once that Carew, who never wrote letters, had probably never opened the writing-table drawer since he had bought it. There the paper had lain, pushed aside carelessly, overlooked in the flurry and anguish of the moment, when the drawer had been burst open, and the outside world had pried into the secrets of the dead man.

Still, there remained the paper—tangible, indisputable, incomprehensible fulfilment of his dream.

His thoughts, leaping backwards, showed him that it was at that instant when his eyes, in sleep, fell on the paper that he knew that something was about to happen to himself. In his dream he had got out of his chair.

Unconsciously he rose.

He had looked before him and had seen the wall open.

He glued his eyes on the corner where the bookcase ended.

In his dream someone had entered.

It seemed to his overwrought imagination that the bookcase began to move.

He darted a look over his shoulder at the mantelpiece. It was twelve o'clock. Twelve o'clock, and the enemy at hand. Twelve o'clock, and no rescue. He told himself that he could bear it no longer. Come what may, he would pile those chairs somehow together and get out of the trap.

He looked up, measuring the distance to the ceiling and the number of chairs.

The trapdoor was shut.

Like a hunted animal caught in a trap, he stood there, rooted to the spot. He must be dreaming. He must be drunk. He must be mad. Who could have shut the trapdoor!

The atmosphere of the room suddenly became unbearable. He felt as if the walls were shutting him in. He told himself that, without air, he should die. Seizing a book, he ran to the windows, pulled aside the curtains, and began breaking the glass. As the first circle splintered under his elbow, the candle guttered, flamed, went out.

Mortimer Dixon was in the dark.

He dropped the book and began going through his pockets to find his matchbox. It seemed to him as though his whole soul depended on his getting a light. His fingers closed on it. There was not a single match left. Supreme irony of Fate! he remembered he had given his last match to the Chinaman to light his cigarette, at the Dalrymples' dinner the night before.

He dropped the matchbox, which fell to the floor with a tinkling thud. He could not have started more if a cannon had gone off in his ear.

He clutched at the curtains, holding on to them, swaying with them, his breath coming in short, hard gasps, his heart banging to suffocation. He thrust his elbow furiously through another pane of glass. He could not even hear the smashing of it on the pavement, the height was so great.

He stood there in the darkness, and suddenly the paralysing apprehension fell upon him again. Like someone stricken with a fatal illness, he felt that something was going to happen—he knew not what.

The room lay in darkness. The heat was intense. There was not a sound; not even the little ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. The clock had stopped. Through

the little broken pane of glass, he could hear the wind moaning outside, around the chimney-stacks.

Suddenly there was a moan, and a pitter-patter of bare feet on polished boards.

Dixon began to tremble from head to foot. His teeth began to chatter. He felt his hair rising on his head. The moon, suddenly freed from the racing clouds, shone through the open curtains. The stained glass of the leaded circles tempered the pale gold to purple and scarlet flame.

He stood by the window holding on to the curtain, and as he stood there, watching, the wall behind the bookcase began to move. The bookcase swung bodily out into the room.

In the open space stood the dead Chinaman.

He was dressed in white. His black hair rose in a kind of wave on his head. His black pigtail hung over his shoulder down to his feet. His black eyes were shut. His face, pinched and transformed, looked as if it were made of yellow wax.

He stood there against the black background, and the moonlight, streaming through the windows, cast an unearthly glory on that terrible countenance, and showed his saffron hands clasped across his breast.

He stood there and, to Dixon, watching him, it seemed as if eternity went by.

Then he began to advance slowly across the room.

The pitter-pattering of his bare feet on the parquet boards drove Dixon to distraction. The sight of that silent and terrible apparition advancing on him, and the knowledge that there was no way of escape chilled his blood to ice. The smell was overpowering. Rightly had Dixon judged that this perfume, aromatic and pungent, was a smell of mystery ; a smell of the East ; a smell of death !

As the Chinaman advanced, Dixon involuntarily retreated. He no longer knew what he was doing. He was beside himself with fear. When he touched the wall, and knew he could go no farther, he was so panic-stricken he could not move.

Slowly the figure advanced upon him. Then, within a foot of Dixon, it stood still and opened its eyes. In that face of yellow wax they looked as if they were made of black glass.

To Dixon, crouching against the wall, it seemed as if he were looking into the very eyes of Death. Mirrored in their

abysmal depths, he seemed to see all the pain, the sorrow, the sin, the terror and the passion of the world.

"If he touches me I shall go mad," Dixon said to himself. The sweat was pouring down his face like rain. "God, don't let him touch me! If he touches me I shall go mad."

Though he did not know it, he was speaking that prayer aloud.

Hardly had the words crossed his lips than the Chinaman stretched out his hand.

At the sight of that saffron hand extended towards him, its horror enhanced by its colour, Dixon, the valiant, the audacious, the pride of Fleet Street, the genius who was to revolutionise the journalistic world, fell on his knees and screamed.

An appalling cry answered him. It was the cry not of a man, but of a beast. The cry of a beast gone mad with hunger, who had tracked his prey to its last lair.

Bewildered, Dixon, still clutching at the wall, got to his feet.

Through the open space in the wall came a second figure. A figure of fire and fury, its white face gleaming in the moonlight, the personification of human hatred, with the seal of Satan on his brow.

God in heaven, what a figure! In its satin robes, its peacock's plumes, waving its jewel-laden hands—the hands of murder incarnate—it flashed, it rushed, it leapt, it hurled itself into the room.

The sight of that second figure was like the elixir of life to Mortimer Dixon. Fear died in him at its approach. This was no supernatural apparition which had broken forth from its grave and come back to earth from the halls of the mighty dead. This was a man like himself! Flesh and blood had yet to be born who could inspire Mortimer Dixon with fear!

He flung himself past that apparition of terror, which had brought him to his knees, and hurled himself with a frenzy that made his strength almost superhuman, on to the second man.

There was a gasping, a cursing, a clutching, a screaming! Voices came to his ears like the sound of running water. Lights flashed before his eyes as if the stars had fallen from the heavens in their courses into that fatal room.

"I've got you, damn you! I've got you!" Dixon cried, closing in on his enemy with a grip of iron. The table went over. The ink spilt.

Dixon slipped on the wet carpet, heeled over, and, like the hall porter before him, felt his feet stepping on the unspeakable softness of a dead man's upturned face.

CHAPTER XLI

WHEN Mortimer Dixon came back to life again he was lying in the drawing-room on Carew's pink satin couch. The windows were wide open. The lights were blazing. His first thought was that it was not the stars which had fallen from their courses in heaven: they were so bright, they must be suns.

The room was full of a delicious odour. Dixon told himself with quiet satisfaction that the great seas in heaven were not made of crystal, as the Bible had it, but of eau-de-Cologne.

He opened his eyes and, as through a glass darkly, he saw faces.

The kindly chauffeur blubbering like a child; the red-faced char, sobbing as if her heart would break; even the great man whom he idolised was there, and his deep-set eyes, too, were filled with tears.

Dixon wondered why on earth they were all crying. It put him out in his calculations. He had understood in heaven there were to be no more tears. It suddenly dawned upon him that they were crying because the Plump Little Party was not there.

Dixon didn't want to stay in heaven any longer. His heaven was down in Brixton, in a common little forty-pound-a-year house, by a workbasket under an old mulberry-tree, in a strip of Mother Earth, which *she* called a garden and which *he* called a backyard.

Suddenly he heard the ticking of a clock. That troubled him more than ever. He thought it was most unsuitable to have clocks in heaven.

Dimly across the ages, it seemed to him that once he had been in hell, listening to the ticking of a clock. Decidedly, he did not want to stay in heaven, where everyone cried; where clocks ticked; and where there was no little girl who

had made poor old Mother Earth such a paradise he had never wanted to die.

In his frantic desire to get back to earth again he struggled to get up.

"He's coming to," said a voice in his ear. "His pulse is a bit stronger now."

Dixon smiled ineffably. The ticking of the clock had stopped. He thought he could put up with heaven if there were no clocks.

He turned his head restlessly on the soft cushion on which he was lying, and something hot and wet splashed down on his cheek.

His awakening memory rebelled madly. Somewhere back in that dim vista, when he had been chained a prisoner in those halls of silence and death, one of his punishments had been to lie in the arms of Sorrow and feel the tears of the world, burning, one by one, on his cheek.

Again he shifted uneasily; and his weary eyes, poor wanderers in a strange land, found their home in the Plump Little Party's beloved face. He was not lying in the arms of Sorrow. He was lying in the arms of Love.

"Darling, lie still," whispered a sweet little voice in his ear. Such a whisper! A mere fraction of sound, but he heard it. It came to him across the seas of silence which set him apart from the rest of the world, and he thought how wonderful heaven was. A second great tear splashed down on his cheek, but he did not mind. They were not the tears that burned the heart and scorched the brain. They were the tears that washed the heartaches of the world away.

For a long, long time, he lay quite quiet. Then he opened his eyes, and making a tremendous effort said: "Are you all right, darling?"

"Yes, Morty," a little voice answered him. "Oh, do be good, darling, and lie still."

But he was not going to lie still any longer. He'd lots he wanted to talk about. "Where's my dear old char?"

"'Ere, dearie." He felt his hand clutched and a voice sobbing out: "Don't you be a silly! wiggle-wagging your 'ead abart. You lie still."

"Hang lying still," said he. His eyes, alight with the fires of fast-approaching delirium, blazed round the room and lighted on the concerned glance of those deep-set eyes

that he loved. "I got him all right," he said faintly. "I kept my word. I told you I would."

"My dear boy, you've done splendidly!" A hand grasped his. "Now, there's a good fellow, lie down and keep still."

A flash of light illumined the darkness that was closing in on Mortimer Dixon. "The one with the patch on his cheek is the one you're looking for," he said, and to his surprise he heard his own voice ring out clear and true! "He hasn't escaped, has he?"

"No," said the grave voice beside him. "He's dead."

Dixon raised his young hands in front of him, as if by sheer strength he would keep the engulfing blackness away. "I didn't kill him, did I?"

"No, my dear boy."

"Beast! I wish I had."

The room began to go up and down, and the blackness of that approaching sea struck him with a sudden sense of chill, but Mortimer Dixon sat tight. "I'm going to be horribly ill," he said quietly. He looked round the circle of faces bending over him. "Damnably ill," he said, nodding his head with intense satisfaction, "but I've got one or two things to settle up first."

"You settle those up afterwards, my dear chap."

"That's the doctor's voice," said Dixon. "He's an ass, that doctor, a clever ass, but an ass! Don't you listen to him; you listen to me!"

"We are listening, darling," said the Plump Little Party faintly. "Oh, *do* lie still!"

"I'm not going to lie still," said her lover savagely. "If I lie still I shall be ill, and I'm not going to be ill until you've answered my questions. Where is she?"

"Better give him his own way." The doctor bent over him. "Who is it you want, my dear chap?"

"The char," said Mortimer Dixon fretfully; "my dear old char! Where is she?"

"'Ere I am, dearie."

"Old dear," he said softly. He took her coarse red hand with a passion of tenderness, and laid it against his cheek. "Why didn't you come back?"

"I couldn't make 'em 'ear, dearie. I banged and I screamed, but they was all asleep, nor I couldn't get back to you, dearie, the trapdoor bein' shut!"

"Who shut it?"

"The wind, dearie. I lef' it propped open thinkin' I could call down to yer and keep up yer spirits like, but I couldn't 'a' fastened it proper, me bein' in such a 'urry, and the wind must 'a' banged it to." She omitted to add that, at the risk of her own life, she had made a rope of her skirts, and had let herself down on to the balcony next door. That he was to learn later. For the moment the explanation passed.

Still the agonised brain was not satisfied.

"I'm standing on a little bit of dry land and there's a great black sea rushing in on me," said Mortimer Dixon, his voice distinct and clear. "Answer my questions quick, for, if the tide comes up before I'm answered, I shall be drowned."

"Arsk away, dearie. I'll tell yer wotever yer wants to know."

"Was it his ghost I saw, or *him*?"

"'Im, dearie; there ain't no such things as ghosts."

"But you said he was dead."

"The doctor, 'e told me 'e was dead, dearie. 'Is 'eart didn't beat at all. But 'e must 'a' bin only in the smoke, same as 'e was before."

"Where did he come from?"

"The boxroom."

"You'd hidden him in there?"

"Yes, dearie; I'd 'id 'im there long afore *you* come to the flat."

"Then I was right, it *was* his shadow I saw on the blind brushing his hair."

"Yes, dearie."

"But that bedroom faces the other way."

"Knowin' you was out, dearie, I took 'im in there. The boxroom was so hot."

"I see. It's simple, isn't it, when you know!" With something of his old fire he turned on the charwoman.

"What was that smell I was always talking about?"

"The smoke, dearie, and the stuff 'e put on 'is pore 'air."

"It was *his* feet went pitter-patter?"

"Yes, dearie; and it was 'im you 'eard moan."

Dixon's thoughts whirled backwards. "Then that beef tea was for *him* that night?"

"Yes, dearie."

That hurt Dixon horribly. "I thought it was for me!"

The charwoman laid her head down on his hand and sobbed bitterly. That passion of protecting affection which she had showered on the dead Chinaman was now centring itself on him. "Don't you worry yer 'ead, dearie. Soon's you're better I'll make yer gallons of beef tea."

There was a long pause, then Dixon roused himself again. "How did the man you say was his brother find out where your John was?"

The charwoman hesitated. "I can't rightly make out, dearie."

"Yes, you can. It was through me! through me! Oh, my old dear, how sorry I am!" He laid his hand on hers, and his sunny smile shone down at her. "That squares us up on the beef tea."

The charwoman fell to sobbing again. "Don't you go worryin' yerself, now! It wasn't your fault. It 'ad to be."

"Where is he now?"

"Dead, dearie. John knifed 'im!"

"Do you mean, they're both dead?"

"Both dead! God's got one, and the devil's got the other. And may God 'ave mercy on 'em both. Amen!"

Still clutching at her hand, Dixon turned his head sharply: "Where's Lord Eastcliffe?"

"Here, my boy."

"I've let her into this, my lord. You'll see she's all right?"

"I'll see to her."

"That sea! It's coming in so fast, I sha'n't have time to escape," whispered Dixon, but not so low but that they heard him. "Get me some brandy, quick." He felt rather than heard the little fluster of whispering around him. "You do as I tell you," he commanded.

"Better give it him," said the doctor's voice. "Nothing can make him worse than he is."

"Bosh!" said Mortimer Dixon. He sat upright, supported, though he did not know it, by loving arms, and waited for the brandy. When they brought it he drank it as if it were water. "I'm generally a teetotaller, I am," he said, grinning at the empty glass. "I've drunk about a pint of this stuff to-night! Not bad for a beginner! Wonder what I shall get down when I'm an old hand!" With a tremendous effort he put his foot off the sofa.

“Morty *darling!*” screamed the Plump Little Party, “what are you going to do?”

“I’m going into the study. Don’t try to prevent me, love. I’ve *got* to go. Help me, like good chaps, will you?”

Silently they did his bidding. Supported on the one side by the doctor and on the other by the chauffeur, he dragged himself into the fatal room.

On the table stood a lamp dimly burning. Through the broken window the moon, no longer fitfully obscured, shone on the two upturned faces of the dead Chinamen as they lay upon the floor. Through the broken window-panes the wind came moaning, like a lost spirit striving to get in.

Mortimer Dixon stood and looked down at the two dead men. He was no longer afraid. The black sea, whose tide was running so swiftly towards him, cut him off from the living and the dead.

“Where’s Lord Eastcliffe?”

“Here, my boy.”

The young journalist gathered himself together for a final effort. His voice rang out true and clear.

“I want you to know that I’m a coward,” he said slowly. “It’s only fair. When *he* came in, I was terrified. I got back as far as I could.” He pointed to the wall, “and then I fell on my knees. Yes, I fell on my knees before a Chinaman, and I screamed like a girl.”

“That’s all right, my boy. I wish every Englishman was as much of a coward as you.”

But, for the first time in his life, Mortimer Dixon paid no heed to that suave voice, which was suave no longer—but trembling with tenderness and fear. He knew that he was nearly at the end of his tether, and he still had questions to ask. “The dog,” he said feebly. “How did the dog get in?”

“John, ’e ’eard ’im scratchin’, dearie, and took ’im into the boxroom. I’d ’ardly time to get ’em both out of the way afore you was back. ’E loved little dogs, John did. ’E sat in there”—she jerked her thumb towards the box-room—“with ’im on ’is knee, as ’appy as ’appy, all day.”

Dixon’s eyes, glittering with fever, followed the direction of her thumb. “That’s a door, then, is it?”

“Yes, dearie. Mr Carew, ’e didn’t like the two rooms connectin’, so ’e filled up the door with books.”

“I’m a nice fool!” said Dixon. “I wonder what you think of me now?” He turned to Lord Eastcliffe.

"You ask me that in a few weeks' time. What I want you to do now is to go to your bed."

"One minute." Dixon's face went deadly white, then it got scarlet. "I can't think," he whispered, drawing his hand to and fro over his forehead. "I can't think."

"Don't try, dear lad; come to bed."

"No." With the last remnant of his remaining strength, he pushed the kind hand away. "Wait a minute, I've got something else to tell you." He clutched at the back of the chair, swaying to and fro. It was pitiful to see his agonised effort to recall his drifting thought. The little circle gathered round him, held their breath. Suddenly his face cleared and he threw up his right hand. "I know," he said triumphantly, "the money." He turned to Lord Eastcliffe. "You know that paper you gave me telling them to honour unlimited cheques drawn by me?"

"Yes; don't you worry about that."

"The cashier has it," he said clearly. "I left it with him to cover him in case anything happened to me. I drew two hundred pounds. I paid eighty pounds out of the first hundred to the Army and Navy Stores. That's *my* bill."

"No, it ain't," cried the charwoman thrusting herself forward. "It was me who did it, my lord. I ran it up in Mr Reggie's name. It was for things for 'im." She pointed to the dead man on the floor.

"Bosh!" said Mortimer Dixon. "It was for me. I say it was for me. Spring chickens—peas and champagne—and jolly good tack too! I've got five hundred pounds of my own at the bank, you take it out of that. See?"

"I'll see to it."

"Fifteen pounds I've given to this good chap here who saved my life. He ought to have more. I promised him his taxi expenses, and a quid a day for himself. You'll see to that too, won't you?"

"I'll see to it."

"The rest of the money's in my rooms in Duke Street, Adelphi. I don't suppose much of it's gone, except for food for the mother and the missing girl. I don't know how much that'll come to"—he began picking at his fingers in a queer way—"but I know it can't be much."

"That's enough, my dear chap," said the doctor's voice behind him.

"That's not all," retorted Mortimer Dixon. "There's

something else. What is it? What is it? I can't think! I can't think!" He beat the back of his hand against his forehead.

The Plump Little Party burst out crying. "Oh, Morty darling! You break my heart."

"That's what I was made for," said Dixon tenderly. "Wait a minute, my sweet. I know," he shouted, "the pink fever! Sweetheart, *you've* got to see to that."

"I'll see to it, darling."

"The pink fever," repeated Dixon in an agony. "The flower girl at Whitechapel . . . I promised it her . . . she gave me the address. I'm going to dance at her wedding. . . . It's to be pale pink, and long and lying down. See to it. Promise me."

"I promise, Morty."

"Then I think that's all," said Mortimer Dixon faintly. His eyes were just closing when by sheer force of will he forced them open again. "If the door was locked, and my old dear couldn't make them hear, and the telephone didn't connect and nobody knew, how was it I was rescued?" He staggered round to the man with the deep-set eyes, who was watching him with a passion of anxiety. "How the devil did *you* come here?"

"I fetched him, Morty," said the Plump Little Party faintly.

"*You fetched him!*" So enormous was the surprise that it actually held in check the delirium which was descending on Mortimer Dixon like a flood. "Where did you fetch him from?"

"From his house, Morty."

"But you didn't know where he lived!"

"I looked it up in the telephone-book."

"But how could you get there in time?"

"He," she pointed to the chauffeur, "was anxious about you, and came round to know if I'd heard. I got into his taxi, and he drove me to Lord Eastcliffe's house."

"And where did you find him, pray?"

"He was in bed, Morty."

"And you had him hauled out?"

"Yes, Morty."

"Gollypots!" shouted Mortimer Dixon, screaming with laughter. "She's got a cheek, hasn't she! Why, I don't believe even *I* would have dared do that!"

It was his last gallant effort.

His face changed, he threw up his hands, gasped, lurched forward, and fell raving into the waiting arms of Delirium, twin sister to Madness and—sometimes—forerunner of Death.

CHAPTER XLII

FOR a long, long time Dixon was terribly ill. For over a week he hovered between life and death. But in the end his wonderful constitution triumphed, and aided by the most devoted care and nursing he slowly came back to life.

The morning before he was going away for a long sea voyage, which the doctor said he must have, the charwoman came to him and, shutting the door cautiously behind her, asked him if he had a few minutes to spare. "I've got somethink I wants to give yer before yer goes," she said mysteriously.

"What is it, old dear?" asked Dixon, smiling.

She put her hand into her apron pocket, and drew out a little parcel done up in brown paper and cotton-wool. "John 'e give it to me," she explained, "but, bless yer 'eart, I don't want it. I thought, mebbe, if you two was a-settin' up 'ouse, you might like to put it on to the mantelpiece."

"I'd love it," said Dixon, in his chivalrous way. "What is it?"

"It ain't much; still, I'd like to think it was you as 'ad it, seein' as 'ow it belonged to 'im and me. If yer don't like it, siy so."

Mortimer Dixon leant back and pulled her coarse red hand over his shoulder and cuddled it against his cheek. "I should love it, whatever it is," he said, "if it belonged to you."

Idly, making a great pretence with the paper so as to please her, he unrolled the little parcel until he came to the cotton wool. "I hope it doesn't bite?" he said, laughing in his own gay way up in her red face.

"Lor' bless yer, dearie, it's only chiny!"

"I love china," said Mortimer Dixon, who hated it. He unrolled the cotton-wool delicately, and disclosed to his amazed eyes the *green jade dog*.

“ Good God ! ” said Mortimer Dixon.

“ There now, ” exclaimed the charwoman vexedly. “ I knew you wouldn’t like it. ”

“ I love it, ” said Dixon absently.

“ Then wot’s the matter, dearie ? ”

“ Wait a minute, old dear, I want to think. Sit down. ”

The charwoman plumped herself down into one of the chairs, and she and the young journalist sat silently together and the sunlight came in and shone on the green jade dog, so that his diamond eyes sparkled as if they were made of fire.

So the three of them sat together—the woman thinking of the past which had been sorrow, the man thinking of the future which was to be happiness, and the magic dog fixing its ruby eye upon the present, which holds within itself the mystery of all three.

Now, Mortimer Dixon wanted that green jade dog badly. He loved jewels with the passion of a woman, not only for their beauty, but for the mystic qualities with which he, in common with the old scientists, firmly believed they were endowed. But in this case it was not the diamonds he wanted so badly, it was the thing itself that attracted him so.

It had descended from father to son for centuries untold. It had been worshipped as an idol in great temples—consulted, perhaps, as an oracle in far-away days! Bereft of its godhead by the hands of the despoiler, it had become the desired of princes and the plaything of kings.

He could see it through fumes of rising incense, standing on its golden altar ; drifting down the centuries worshipped ; revered ; consulted, carrying its pedigree of magic in its diamond eyes. Hard-hearted men had bared their hearts before it ; beautiful women had crouched on their knees beseeching it for its aid. For its sake, two princes, twin sons of a great mother, had quarrelled to the death.

This idol, which had been born in palaces, which had crossed the seas, which, but for a charwoman’s loyalty, would have been chucked into the whirlpool of a pawnbroker’s shop, now stood awaiting its fate, on a little table in a London flat.

Do you wonder that Mortimer Dixon wanted it ?

He would have loved to have held it in his hands, picturing to himself the events of its history, sensing its mystic gifts

in his hours of leisure and, in his hours of work, confiding to its magic ears the questions to which its glittering eyes would respond in fantastic thought.

Yes, he would have loved it, but it was not to be.

He laid his hand, still thin and frail, on the red hand which lay on the table beside him, and shook his head. "I can't take it, old dear."

"It ain't good enough?"

"It's too good."

"Go hon! it ain't worth tuppence."

"It's worth a great deal of money—perhaps thousands of pounds."

"Right-o! If it was worth millions, I'd give it yer just the same."

"And I'd refuse to take it."

"Why?"

"Because it isn't yours to give."

This was too much for the charwoman. She jumped to her feet, and her face went purple. "Then whose is it to give, I'd like to know," she said, in the shrill voice that always came to her when she was in a rage. "It was John's, wasn't it? Well, 'e give it me. I s'pose that was all right, wasn't it?"

"No, old dear, I'm afraid it wasn't."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because it wasn't his to give."

"Not 'is!" The charwoman rose in a royal rage.

"His while he was living, but not his to give away after he was dead."

"Whose is it then?"

"That's what I'm going to find out." He looked into her face and smiled. "I want it more than you want me to have it," he said, nodding his head at her. "But it can't be done, old dear. Go and find me a box, and we'll put temptation out of the way."

It was just at that moment that the Plump Little Party came in. "What is it you want a box for, Morty?"

"To put this in."

She came forward and stood behind her lover, exclaiming with delight: "Oh, what a darling! Whose is it?"

"'Is, only 'e won't 'ave it. I s'pose, next, 'e'll be callin' me a thief." The charwoman tossed her head haughtily, and marched out of the room.

"Oh, she's crying!" the Plump Little Party exclaimed in dismay. "What *have* you been doing to her?"

Mortimer Dixon explained to her about the dog.

"Oh, Morty! and he can tell fortunes! The darling! May I look at him?"

"Of course, my sweet."

She bent over the table and picked up the curio, looking at it intently. Her lover, watching her, thought of the hands which had held the Sacred Dog; royal hands; priestly hands; hands laden with jewels; hands stained with sin; and he told himself that the little talisman had never been held in such sweet, pure hands before.

"They say, if you wish while you hold it, your wish will come true," he told her solemnly.

The clear brown eyes looked back into his. "I *have* wished."

"What have you wished, my sweet?"

But the Plump Little Party would not tell. She could keep secrets as well as her lover. No matter how he begged her, she only shook her head.

The charwoman bounced in, and smacked a dirty cardboard shoe box on to the table, with a dirty piece of string. "'Ere's the box, if you're so anxious to get rid of it!"

"Oh, not that horrible thing!" cried Dixon, his artistic soul in revolt.

"Take it or leave it! It's the only one *I* can find." The charwoman bounced out again.

"Wait a minute!" cried Mortimer's little sweetheart. In another minute she came back with a little silver box in her hand.

It was not a very wonderful box. It was not a very expensive box. But it was the present of all presents her lover had given her, that she loved the best. It was made of pure silver and had a green jade stone in the centre, shaped like a heart.

"Let's put it in this, Morty!"

"What, your box! Certainly not!"

"I want to, darling."

"Why, don't you care for it any more?"

The Plump Little Party smiled. She often thought that this wonderful lover of her who was so clever at reading other people's thoughts often did not guess hers. "Oh, Morty!" she said.

“ Then, why do you want to give it away ? ”

“ You love that dog, Morty, yet you give it away.”

“ But the box is yours.”

“ And the dog is yours.”

She lifted the little lid with the green jade heart. “ We both give up what we love best. I’d like my box to be with your dog. See ! the darling little heart is made of jade to match.” She tenderly laid the little talisman inside the box, and shut down the lid. Her face, as she did it, was like an angel’s, it was so sweet.

Perhaps it was that look that did it, or perhaps it was the unconscious influence of the talisman. Be that as it may, her lover fell at her feet and, as if she were a holy thing, kissed her little outstretched hands.

“ Now, I’ll go and find a piece of green ribbon to tie it up,” said she, smiling down at him.

They were happily tying it up, together, when the door opened and the charwoman banged in. “ If yer don’t want it,” she snapped, “ I’ll ’ave it back.”

“ Oh no, you won’t,” said Dixon, laughing.

“ Then I shall leave.”

“ You’ve got to do that in any case,” Dixon replied.

“ And if I am, it ain’t for *you* to dismiss me,” she whipped round at Dixon. “ I belongs to Mr Carew.”

“ Pardon me,” said Mortimer Dixon politely, “ you belong to *me*.” He put his arm round her heaving shoulders. “ First, you’re going to live at Brixton and look after *her*, and then, when we’re married, you’re going to look after *me*.”

“ Go hon ! ” said the charwoman. “ She won’t want a cross old thing like me.”

“ Won’t she ? ” said the Plump Little Party. She crept up and slipped her little hand through the great coarse arm. “ Just you come and see.”

The charwoman stood between the two of them, looking helplessly from one to the other. Then she burst into tears.

With immense satisfaction, Dixon surveyed the pair crying happily together over his manifold talents and virtues, then he picked up the little box, and went his way to the great mansion at the corner of Portland Place.

“ I want to see his Excellency,” he explained to the slight, black-headed secretary who came to speak to him in the hall. “ I’ve found some property which I wish to restore to him.”

"His Excellency has lost nothing that I know of."

"Perhaps you don't know everything," said Mortimer Dixon blandly. "All the same I've got some property of his!"

"His Excellency sees no one."

"All the same, he'll see me." Dixon took a card out of his pocket and wrote underneath it the one word "*Whitechapel*." "Give that to him, will you?"

"Whitechapel?" said the secretary, reading it. "What has his Excellency to do with Whitechapel?"

"I told you, you didn't know everything," said Mortimer Dixon dryly. "You'd better ask him!"

Something in that steadfast blue eye, or something in that cool voice, must have impressed the young Chinaman, for the superciliousness died out of his face and voice.

"I will take it at once to his Excellency," he said.

"You will be wise," replied Mortimer Dixon.

In less than two minutes the young man was back again, and, preceded by a whirlwind of bows and apologies, Dixon found himself ascending the Embassy stairs.

"His Excellency will see you immediately," whispered the secretary. He opened the door as he spoke, and in another minute Dixon stood in the presence of the Chinese ambassador.

The room was so dark that, for an instant, he could not see his way. The blinds were closed. The windows were shut. The curtains were drawn. Enclosed in that semi-obscurity, the air, vitiated to suffocation, was redolent of the smell that Dixon loathed. He was still so weak from his illness, and the perfume brought back to him so vividly the terrific occurrences of the past few weeks, that, for a moment, he felt as if he were going to faint. Then the mists cleared and he discerned, enshrined in the shadows, an old man watching him with inscrutable, oblique eyes. "Come forward, Mr Dixon, and sit down."

Mechanically, Dixon came forward, but he did not sit down.

"I have heard of you, and what you have done. You have, of course, come to claim a reward?"

"Reward?" repeated Dixon blankly.

"We offered five hundred pounds reward, Mr Dixon, to the one who found the . . ." he paused, ". . . the person who is dead."

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir," said Dixon simply. "I came to return you this." He took out the little silver box and, as he spoke, laid it down on the table before the old man.

"That box does not belong to me."

"No, Excellency, nor its contents; but you will probably know to whom it does belong."

The delicate fingers, laden with jewels, gently plucked the green ribbons asunder, lifted the lid, and the wonderful old eyes peered into the box.

At sight of what lay there, there was a silence, which seemed to Dixon, standing in the darkness and perfume-laden atmosphere, as if it lasted for years.

"Where did you get this?"

The young journalist explained in words as simple as they were few. When he had finished, there was again a deep silence—a silence, it seemed to Dixon, which spoke louder than any words.

"Where did the box come from?"

Again Dixon briefly explained. When he had finished, the old man, without a word, replaced the lid and tied it up again with the green ribbon. Then he raised himself to his feet. He was so feeble, Dixon longed to aid him, but, so great was the majesty that hedged him about, he did not dare.

"Follow me!"

Dixon followed him—through an inner room, down a little passage, to a door which was locked.

Dixon's heart, not yet fully recovered from the fearful strain he had put on it, began to thump as if it would burst.

The key turned in the lock, and he followed the gorgeous old figure, weighed down with its golden embroideries, into the room.

It was large. It was dark. The smell that Dixon hated came to him fitfully, in gusts. In the centre of a raised dais stood a low catafalque, whose gilded legs terminated in dragons' heads. At the foot and head of the catafalque burned thick tapers in golden candlesticks.

At the four corners of the catafalque, on tall pedestals with dragons writhing up them, stood braziers of smouldering incense which, at intervals, burst into tongues of flame. A great gold Buddha, presiding Deity of the Dead, with

placid golden hands folded serenely on his knees, stared down at the strange scene out of his inscrutable emerald eyes.

Surrounding the dais knelt rows of white figures. From their midst arose a strange, continuous murmuring, which reminded Dixon of the humming of bees.

At the old man's approach, the white figures rose and parted; obliterating themselves like white shadows, forming a design of almost geometrical precision, they lay, face downwards, on the floor.

The great man raised his frail hand and beckoned. Dixon crept forward. His heart had stopped thumping, but he was shaking with excitement. It seemed to him that the curtain was about to be lifted on the last act of the drama which he had almost laid down his life to see.

Slowly the old man turned down the gorgeous pall which was laid across the bed. It was so heavy with gold that the frail hands could scarcely lift it. As it slipped down, inch by inch, Dixon could hardly breathe.

There, on their bed of satin and gold, lay the embalmed bodies of the two Chinamen. Their heads reposed on the same bolster, their hands were clasped in each other's. They lay, the two brothers who had hated each other, sharing one bed, sharing one pillow, as, in the days of their coming, they had lain together on their mother's breast.

It seemed to Mortimer Dixon, as he stood there, that for the first time in his life he realised the divinity of death.

"A good man and a bad man," said the old man coldly. "The gods had need of them both."

Their epitaph had been spoken. Had the historians of the world inscribed their histories, what more was left to say!

Slowly, the frail old hand drew the golden quilt back again over the two faces.

There was no sign of emotion in the face, no sound of feeling in the voice; yet the thought came to Dixon that he was looking on the faces of his two dead sons.

The great man moved away, and the priests went back to their praying.

They left the dead men lying, hedged in by flame and prayer.

Dixon followed the majestic figure back into his own room.

The old man sank into a chair and, once again, Dixon stood at the table and waited. It seemed to him, as it had

seemed before, that the silence between them lasted an eternity of years.

Suddenly the old man opened his dark eyes. "If you will ring the bell, Mr Dixon, they will bring you your five hundred pounds."

Dixon's face went white to the lips. "I thank your Excellency. I came to restore a piece of lost property, not to claim a reward."

"You have earned it."

"I cannot take it, Excellency."

"Are you so rich?"

"I am a poor man, Excellency."

"Then why not take the money?"

"There are some things one can do and some things one cannot do, Excellency. This is one of the things I cannot do."

The strange, oblique eyes looked up into the strong, young face as if they would search out his very soul. "You are one of those men who can keep silent?"

Dixon was dumb.

"If you will not take money, will you take a place?"

"A place, Excellency?"

"There are places in China for such men as you."

"I thank your Excellency. My work is here."

"So be it, Mr Dixon. I wish you good-day."

"Good-day, Excellency." Dixon was at the door when the imperious voice, whose every word sounded like a command, called him back.

"You have forgotten your box."

"I thank your Excellency, I do not want the box."

"It has no value for you?"

Dixon's eyes began to sparkle angrily. "It's the dearest thing on earth to the one who gave it, Excellency. It is a poor box, a cheap box; but if love and purity and goodness are the magic things I hold them to be, it is a fitting resting-place even for a talisman of kings."

"It is well said," replied the old man. "The Sacred Dog shall not be parted from this little box."

Again, Dixon was turning and again the voice called him back. "Farewell!" The frail old hand, glittering with jewels was held out. Mortimer Dixon fell on his knee and kissed it. He took no more shame to himself for that act than if he had knelt and kissed the hand of his own king.

“ They say in my country that the blessing of a sonless man availeth with the gods. Will you accept mine ? ”

Mortimer Dixon bowed his head. He felt the touch of the frail old hand, then he got up and went.

As he went slowly down the Embassy stairs, to his surprise he found that his eyes were wet with tears.

CHAPTER XLIII

THAT evening Dixon gave a little supper-party at his flat, to celebrate not only his recovery but, as he put it in his own quaint way, his going away and getting rid of them all the next day.

It was a wonderful little party. There were the widow, and her daughter, and Reggie Carew, come back from Berlin unexpectedly, and the beautiful girl from next door.

The charwoman cooked the supper and the chauffeur waited. Mortimer Dixon sat at the bottom of the table and the Plump Little Party sat at the head. It was the first time she had ever sat at the head of a table, and she was so excited that her little white face was quite pink.

She wore a white muslin dress with a bunch of pink rambler roses in her soft brown hair. The two other girls were dressed in satin and laces, and Margaret Dalrymple wore her wonderful pearls. But Mortimer Dixon had no eyes for either of them. All he saw was that sweet little face at the other end of the table, who needed neither satins nor laces nor pearls to make her beautiful—only the magic of her own sweet charm.

Yes, it was a wonderful party. When it came to the champagne, Mortimer Dixon and the Plump Little Party went both together out into the kitchen and brought in the dear old char.

Mortimer Dixon made her sit in his chair at the bottom of the table and they drank her health and sang “ For she’s a jolly good fellow,” until you would have thought that the roof was coming down.

In the middle of it all, there was a postman’s knock at the door, and the Dalrymples’ smart parlourmaid, who had come in to help wait at table, brought in a letter and a parcel.

The letter was for Mortimer Dixon, but the parcel was

addressed to Miss Mary Withers, which was the Plump Little Party's name.

"For you, miss," said the smart parlourmaid.

"For me?" The Plump Little Party looked at it aghast.

It was a most peculiar parcel. It was done up in queer white stuff, unlike any paper she had ever seen before. It was tied up in green ribbons, and, in the middle, there was a great gold seal with a great dragon sitting upon its tail.

"Whatever can it be!" Her little fingers began trembling as they always did when she was excited. "You open it for me, Morty, please."

So Dixon opened it for her. It was a most beautifully packed parcel, all pink cotton wool and a kind of soft stuff that smelt like hay. In the middle of it, like a little bird lying in a nest, there was a round casket made of ivory and gold. In the centre there was a great stone, shaped like a heart, that flashed and shone, just as if a star had dropped down on to the table from the sky.

"Gollypots!" cried Mortimer Dixon, holding it up.

"Heavens!" shrieked Margaret Dalrymple. "It's a *diamond!*"

"A diamond!" whispered the Plump Little Party, and she turned quite white.

"Look if there's anything inside, old chap," shouted Reggie Carew.

Mortimer Dixon took off the lid.

Inside, on a white satin cushion, lay an exquisite diamond pendant with a jade heart in the middle, suspended on a chain of perfectly graduated pearls. On the ivory card which lay beneath it was painted a little green dog, and on it was written, in queer shaky handwriting, "A talisman for the magician who has learnt her magic from the gods."

It was only after they had all gone and the two of them were alone that Mortimer Dixon thought of the letter that had come at the same time as the parcel. He fished it out from the remains of the dessert and looked at the address.

He knew whom the letter was from before he opened it. The handwriting on the envelope was the handwriting of that idol of his whom he worshipped from afar.

Talk about the Plump Little Party's hands trembling when she opened her parcel! It was nothing to the way Mortimer Dixon's trembled when he opened his letter.

Inside the envelope was a piece of paper with two words

scrawled on it, "Well Done," and the well-known initials underneath.

It was Mortimer Dixon's dream realised. "It's better than the diamonds!" he gasped. Then he noticed that she held something in her hand. "What's that you've got there?"

"It dropped out of the letter, Morty." The Plump Little Party opened it softly, and held it out before her lover's eyes.

It was a cheque for a thousand pounds.

"Gollypots! gollypots! gollypots!" screamed Dixon. He seized the Plump Little Party and whirled her like a lunatic round the room. You bet your boots, no question as to his refusing *that* cheque!

Just like him! The first thing that Mortimer Dixon thought of was how they could spend it.

"I know," he yelled, "we'll go back and buy those chairs and tables at Maple's, and you shall have the pink satin couch, and the pink silk cushions, and every blessed thing. You won't refuse them this time, will you?"

The Plump Little Party looked up at Mortimer Dixon. She couldn't have refused him anything. This wonderful lover of hers, with his thin face and his burning eyes, who had so nearly been snatched away from her by the clutches of death. If he had wanted to buy gold saucepans and diamond washstands, if the cheque would have run to it, she would have said yes.

"Oh, Morty!" she cried, "you know you can have whatever you like!"

Mortimer Dixon was not the kind that needed twice telling. He took her into his arms, and kissed her until she did not know whether she was standing on her head or her heels.

"Darling! darling! *darling!*" cried Dixon. "Did anyone ever hear such luck! The mystery solved, the adventure ended, and our new home going to be just as I wanted it to be, and you with THIS!" He touched the great pendant as it hung round the soft white neck from its chain of pearls.

"But you haven't got *your* talisman, Morty!"

"Haven't I?" said Mortimer Dixon, and his blue eyes shone down at her as if they were made of blue stars. "I've got the talisman of the world!"

STANLEY PAUL'S

NEW SIX SHILLING NOVELS

A Grey Life: A Romance of Bath. "RITA"

Author of "Peg the Rake," "My Lord Concessit," "Countess Daphne," "Grim Justice," etc.

"Rita" has chosen Bath as the setting for her new novel. She has disdained the "powder and patches" period, and given her characters the more modern interests of Bath's transition stage in the seventies and eighties. Her book deals with the struggles of an impoverished Irish family of three sisters, living at Bath, to whom comes an orphaned niece with the romantic name of Rosaleen Le Suir. "Rita" claims that an Irish adventurer, named Theophrastus O'Shaughnessy, who plays an important part in this book, is the male prototype of her own immortal "Peg the Rake."

The Destiny of Claude. MAY WYNNE

Author of "Henri of Navarre," "The Red Fleur-de-Lys," "Honour's Fetters," etc.

To escape a convent life, Claude de Marbeille joins her friend Margot de Ladrennes in Touraine. Jacques, Comte de Ladrennes, a hunchback, falls in love with her, and when the two girls go to Paris to enter the suite of the fifteen year old Mary Queen of Scots, he follows and takes service with the Duke of Guise. There follow many romantic and exciting adventures concerning the perilous childhood of Mary Queen of Scots, into which the characters of the story are brought by acts of treachery and the work of spies. The hero, a young officer of the Scottish Guards, is imprisoned and threatened with poison, and much of the story relates his ardent search after his sweetheart, who has been betrayed into captivity by the jealousy of a friend. This is a thoroughly good story.

The King's Master. OLIVE LETHBRIDGE and JOHN DE STOURTON

A novel dealing with the troublous times of Henry VIII., in which the political situation, Court intrigues and religious discussions of the period are treated in a masterly manner. A strong love element is introduced, and the characters of Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell are presented in an entirely new light, while plot and counter-plot, hair-breadth escapes, love, hate, revenge, and triumph, all go to form the theme.

The Celebrity's Daughter. VIOLET HUNT

Author of "The Doll," "White Rose of Weary Leaf," etc.

"The Celebrity's Daughter," which, like Miss Violet Hunt's other novels, is founded on a much-entangled plot, only fully unravelled in the last chapter, is the autobiography of the daughter of a celebrity who has fallen on evil days. The book is told in the author's own inimitable style, with the humour, the smart dialogue, and the tingling life of her earlier novels.

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